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BATTLING BUCKEROOS

Tom West

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Complete Novel

SIXES SPEAK LOUDER THAN JUDGES

Sam Benson lost his inheritance when twelve thousand dollars in gold had been allowed to slip through his fingers. But he'd never regarded that bit of clumsiness as anything but unfinished business. Now he'd returned to the scene of his folly with a quick gun and one purpose on his mind—to find out what really happened that fateful day.

The words of an old drunk exploded like gun-cotton in his brain. Because if they were true, the real culprit was one of his own flesh and blood kinsmen. But how could he be sure they were true?

Somewhere in Sweetgrass was a murderer masked by a good name—and Sam was going to pull that mask off no matter who was revealed behind it!

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TOM WEST was born in London and served with the British Army in France during World War I. Discharged in his early twenties, he returned home packing a dirty kit bag that contained, among other things, the manuscript of a war novel which he had painstakingly tapped out on an old typewriter during weary months in the military hospital. The following morning he awoke to find that his mother, to whom cleanliness was next to godliness, had burnt the dirty kit bag and its entire contents. Thus his first literary effort met a fiery fate.

In an endeavor to regain his health, he crossed the Atlantic and for several years worked as choreman, teamster, and puncher on ranches in the California west. Vigor restored, he turned to his typewriter again and through the years earned a livelihood in a succession of writing jobs—copywriter, reporter, country editor, and finally free-lance writer. He has turned out thirty-six Western novels and figures the total of his articles, editorials, etc., must run way up in the hundreds.

Now with a son, a World War II veteran, who is chief engineer in a large industrial plant, and a daughter engaged in hospital work, Tom West spends much of his time roaming California, Arizona, Utah and other Western states with his wife, in a trailer.

BATTLING BUCKEROOS

by
TOM WEST

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BATTLING BUCKEROOS

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GUN RICH

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CHAPTER ONE

DAWN GRAYED the adobes of Buffalo Fork, set on the Sweetgrass flats, and the sleeping town lay quieter than Boothill. The plankwalks were deserted, the sandy stretch of Main Street empty and the hitchrails bare. And there was no more peaceful spot than The Lone Star saloon. At one end of the bar an apron relaxed in an armchair, yawning and listlessly thumbing the pages of a tattered magazine. To his front, unoccupied liquor-stained tables and straightback chairs were scattered over the butt-littered floor, and high on the end wall the pendulum of a clock swung monotonously. The only sound that disturbed the decorous quiet was the stentorious snoring of a rider sprawled across a side table.

The batwings squealed and the saloon roustabout, a shabby derelect, limped in. Limpy was commonly regarded as being a trifle "off his mental reservation." A black stubble of beard mottled his blotched features, uncut hair curled around his ears and his rheumy, red-rimmed eyes held the pleading, apprehensive look of a whipped cur.

The barkeep looked up, nodded briefly and returned to his magazine.

Shuffling around, the roustabout began cleaning up. The

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clang of metal as he gathered spittoons disturbed the snoring rider. He stirred uneasily, raised his head, blinked uncertainly, then grabbed his forehead with both hands and groaned. After a spell, he focussed the clock across the saloon. "Five-twenty!" he muttered incredulously. " 'Tain't so!" Hands on the table, he levered to his feet, a tall young rider, but not overly tall—for a Texan. His reddish hair, clipped short, stuck out like the bristles of a stiff brush. A faded hickory shirt, stained pants and spurred boots garbed his lanky, loose-jointed frame, all bone and muscle from hard riding. His rugged features were square, heavy-jawed and blackened by the sun, but they reflected a lurking good humor. His blue eyes, now dull, commonly held a joyous recklessness.

Everyone knew that Sam Benson was the friskiest colt in Sweetgrass Basin. The younger son of "Bull" Benson, who rodded more range than all the other spreads in the Basin thrown together, Sam always acted as though he didn't have a care in the world. Good-natured, hard-fighting, devil-may-care, he seemed to have a natural affinity for trouble, but it never seemed to bother him. Men liked Sam. In a tight spot, he'd stick closer than a mustard plaster.

Right then he was in anything but a devil-may-care mood. He began to stagger rather than walk across the floor, finally reached the bar and sagged gratefully upon it.

The apron dropped his magazine and moved up on the farther side.

"Gee willikens!" muttered Sam, "I got a kicking bronc inside my brain box and that hoss is sure shod with dynamite. You gents musta served me rattlesnake juice and liquid fire." He groaned. "I never felt like this in all my born days."

"Guess you been on a real bender," sympathized the barkeep. He busied himself with several bottles, gave the resultant mixture a quick professional stir and handed a foaming glass to the sagging Sam. "Down that!" he directed.

Sam grabbed the glass, eyed its contents with distaste, then swallowed the sizzling liquid with several quick gulps. He set the empty glass down with a twisted grimace. "Now

gimme two fingers of bourbon to wash the doggoned taste away," he demanded.

The apron was sliding a bottle toward him when his patient jerked erect with a quick, startled exclamation, "The dinero!"

Blindly, he plunged across the saloon, colliding with tables and chairs. When he reached the side table, he searched around wildly, glimpsed a limp gunny sack lying on the floor, grabbed it and shook it with wide-eyed disbelief.

At the bar, the apron stood gazing with undisguised astonishment. "Lost something, Sam?" he called out.

"Twelve thousand smackers!" returned the rider somberly, still gazing at the gunny sack in his hand. "Some cowhocked hoosthief done hogswiggled me!" Trailing the empty sack with one hand, the other clasped to his forehead, he mournfully returned to the bar.

"You lamp any hambres hanging around that table?" he inquired earnestly.

The apron shook his head. "Nopel! When I relieved Fatso at midnight you were out-cold. The crowd was beginning to thin and I swear nobody bothered you."

Sinking upon a nearby chair, the rider sat desperately trying to prod his fogged brain into recollection. "I rode in around sundown," he muttered, "put up the buckskin at the livery, dropped in to kill a couple of hours before the eight o'clock stage went through. Bought one . . . two short drinks. Hell, they wouldn't leave me like this!"

"I reckon," ventured the barkeep, "you kinda lost count."

"Not toting paw's twelve thousand," returned Sam, eyes puzzled. "You know the Old Man! He laid it down flat—keep sober 'til you deliver that dinero to the cattle buyer at Mule Creek. Paw's been buying range bulls, pure bloods. Dammit, I warn't in a drinking mood."

Diplomatically, the barkeep said nothing. Wandering around collecting spittoons, the rheumy-eyed roustabout paused and eyed the frowning rider with vacant, sympathetic gaze, "You was sick, Mr. Benson, awful sick!" he averred.

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"I feel doggoned sick right now," growled Sam. "Gimme my gun!" The apron lifted a gunbelt from a shelf beneath the bar and plunked it on the mahogany. Morosely, Sam buckled it around his middle and headed for the batwings.

CHAPTER TWO

OUTSIDE, the stars were paling and distant peaks glowed golden at the touch of the rising sun, but the cowtown was still wreathed in shadow. Square-facaded stores loomed ghostlike and canopied plankwalks were canyons of darkness. Nothing stirred, beyond a mangy cur sniffing aimlessly across the ruts, and rats scurrying around a garbage tub at the mouth of an alley.

Boots drumming hollow on the scuffed plankwalk, Sam moved disconsolately in the direction of the sheriff's office.

The rock-fronted county courthouse with its high, narrow windows was darkened. Still battling bewilderment, the rider mounted the stone steps, pushed through a swinging door and paced down a wide, gloomy corridor with ornate lamps mounted high on the walls. One, lighted and turned low, gave faint illumination.

On either side, closed doors were lettered with the names of county officials. Along the base of one door, a band of light showed. Sam pushed it back and entered the office of Mike O'Dell, County Sheriff.

The room was high-ceilinged, sparsely furnished. The walls were plastered with "Wanted" notices, fly-specked and yellowing, half a dozen straight back chairs lined below them. In one corner, a gun rack held several sawed-off shotguns and, at the far end, a heavy roll-top desk, spur-scratched and cigarette-scarred set below narrow windows. A bracketted oil lamp burned smokily.

Feet cradled on the desk, his body slid down in a well-padded swivel chair, a man slumped, sound asleep. A "Deputy Sheriff" badge was pinned to his flannel shirt.

He came awake with a start when Sam's impatient hand dropped on a shoulder. Blinking, he lowered his legs and straightened. He was a long-gearred, bony-faced individual who Sam knew as "Plug" Nichols, night deputy. The deputy stifled a yawn, eying his visitor. "Wal," he commented caustically, "so you finally slept it off!"

"Yep!" snapped Sam, "But here's something I can't sleep off." He held out the empty gunnysack.

Nichols eyed it, forehead wrinkled with perplexity. "Wal?" he questioned.

"I was packing twelve thousand gold in this sack."

The deputy whistled softly. "You don't say! Who in hell lifted it?"

"How would I know," confessed Sam miserably. "I was drunk."

"That ain't no lie!" drawled Nichols. "I reckon," he decided, "I best go get the sheriff."

Sam dropped wearily upon a chair as the deputy lifted his hat off a peg and slapped it on. He was morosely chewing a quirley when brisk footsteps resounded in the corridor outside. The door swung open and a burly, wide-shouldered man, going to fat, strode in. He wore dark pants, thrust into high boots, plaid shirt and leather coat, and had plainly dressed in a hurry. His Stetson askew, revealed uncombed black hair, his shirt was unbuttoned and a peppering of beard prickled his jaw. But an amiable smile wreathed his florid features. If Sheriff Mike O'Dell felt irritation at being hauled out of bed at dawn on a Sunday morning he gave no sign of it.

O'Dell had been re-elected sheriff of Sweetgrass County as long as Sam could remember. He was an efficient lawyer, with an inexhaustible fund of good humor and enough political sense to close his eyes when occasion demanded. And he'd reached the stage where an office chair was more comfortable than a saddle.

He dropped his hat on a peg, sank heavily into the padded swivel chair and eyed the glooming rider. "Wal, Sam," he prompted, "Plug tells me you got trouble."

"Big trouble!" returned the rider. O'Dell bit the tip off a black cigar, clamped it between strong white teeth and lit it. Puffing impassively, he lumped in his chair and heard the story.

"Now don't take this amiss, Sam," he smiled, when the rider was through. "But I'm wondering how come Bull let you pack twelve thousand dollars."

Sam grinned in return, a trifle sheepishly. He knew his reputation around the Basin. "Paw bought these here pure-bred bulls," he explained "You know he got no use for banks or paper money. He buys for gold and sells for gold. This cattle dealer's down at Mule Creek, sixty miles south, on the stage route. Wal, Bull ain't feeling so good, his ticker's acting up, and Mark don't pack a gun. So I was elected."

A poor choice, reflected the sheriff. Everyone in the Basin knew the batwings of a saloon had a stronger pull on Sam than a magnet for steel. But his thoughtful gaze gave no clue to his thoughts. "It's plain what happened," he said. "It was Saturday night, the saloon was crowded. Some saddle-bum lifted that dinero. You were too drunk to give a damn. Who were you drinking with?"

"No-one!" returned Sam promptly. "I just stepped in to wash the dust out of my throat and await the stage. And who would guess I was packing gold in that gunnysack?"

"Could be you talked, you always were a friendly cuss."

The rider shook his head hopelessly. "Dammit, Mike, I just don't recollect nothing."

"Dead to the world when I made the rounds," contributed Nichols. "You sure were freighting a load, Sam."

"Ain't no sense fretting," advised the sheriff, switching on his cheery smile. "We'll poke around, check up on strangers, watch for free spending. Could be we'll hit the jackpot."

With this small consolation, Sam left.

Main Street was still deserted when he descended the courthouse steps, but the windows of the New York Grill, the Chink hash house, bloomed yellow. He swallowed two mugs of black coffee, but his head still felt as though it were

filled with molten lead. Whisky, he thought despondently, had never affected him this way before. With no enthusiasm, he hit for the livery, rigged his pony and headed back to the ranch.

The sun was arcing up when he came in sight of the Box B, sprawled over the flat with Medicine Creek, a verdant ribbon of drooping willows and bunched chaparral, looping behind it. Around the rambling rock-and-adobe ranchhouse were grouped bunkhouse and cook shack, big horse barn, hay barns, open-sided wagon shed, blacksmith shop. The place looked like a small town. Overhead, a windmill clanked and whirled. Dust hung above a wire-fenced pasture, stirred by the hooves of drifting saddle stock.

He rode into the dusty yard, reined in at the water trough, watered the buckskin and slackened the cinches. Then, looping his reins around a rail of the nearby corral, he drew a deep breath and walked slowly toward the house. Punchers hunkered in the shade of the adobe bunkhouse wall, or squatted like crows along the top rail of the corral, eyed him incuriously. No-one outside of Bull and his brother Mark, knew he had packed the gold. He stiffened unconsciously as his glance lit upon a tall, rawboned rider who stood negligently propped up against the jamb of the bunkhouse door, a quirley drooping from his lips and a sweat-streaked old Stetson yanked down over his eyes. Tod Turman ramroded West Fork, the original Box headquarters but now a subsidiary ranch, located in the Blackwater foothills, sixteen miles west. Sundays, he rode in for orders and Bull usually took pains to keep him out of Sam's way. From the moment they first met, the two had struck more sparks than two grating chunks of hard granite. They had worked up to a pitch of mutual animosity that threatened to erupt into flaming gunplay when Bull transferred Turman to West Fork, and gave Sam strict orders to ride clear of the hills.

Turman had the reputation of being tougher than a basket of snakes. Indian blood showed in his high cheekbones and swarthy, leathery features. He was unsparing of men and

horses, unscrupulous, a callous gunfighter, but Bull could bank on him. No matter how tough the job, he'd tackle it without a murmur, and master it. As stubborn as a moseyhorn himself, Bull stuck by his West Fork foreman, ignoring his unsavory reputation.

As Sam passed, Turman called out, in derisive challenge, "Howdy, Sam!"

The rider nodded briefly.

"Your lip drop any lower you'll sure step on it!"

Sam whirled and approached the swarthy foreman. Their builds were very similar, but Turman, an older man, carried more weight.

"I don't figure it's any of your doggoned business how I look," barked Sam, the accumulated frustration and bottled anger of the past few hours boiling to the surface.

Malicious amusement sparked the foreman's eyes. "Techy as a teased snake!" he taunted.

Then, in a flash, they tore into each other, fists swinging. Lounging punchers suddenly came to life. Men jumped down from the corral rail, streamed out of the bunkhouse, darted out of barns, forming an excited, yelling ring around the two battling men.

Dust rose thick, stirred by their scuffing boots, as the two slugged it out. There was no dodging or feinting. They fought toe to toe, eyes bitter, fists pounding like sledges. The yelling died away and there was no sound save that of gasping breath and the flat thud of fists upon flesh. Blood began to trickle from a corner of Sam's mouth. A fist clipped his jaw. He rolled back on his heels, then bored in again. Turman's left eye was fast disappearing behind blackened flesh and he spat a loosened tooth quickly to one side. Grunting and gasping, they hammered each other with savage ferocity.

A roar sounded from the direction of the ranchhouse, "Quit, you doggoned hammerheads!" The circling punchers silently melted away as a veritable bull of a man forged across the yard. Bull Benson was shorter than either fighter, but he was as broad and massive as a bear. Weathered, hard

as a lava knob, his craggy features were stamped with arrogance, but there wasn't a weak spot on them.

Stolidly, he trudged up to the pair, now standing apart, bloodied and dishevelled.

Fixing Sam with flinty blue eyes, deepset beneath graying eyebrows, he demanded, "What you doing here?"

The rider wiped blood from his torn lips. "I'll explain—inside," he returned curtly.

Bull switched attention to the foreman. "What's holding you," he rasped. "Ride!" Without a word, Turman swung away.

The rancher headed back to the house, Sam tailing him.

They entered a long, low-ceilinged living room, into which daylight filtered through slit windows, cut in the thick adobe walls. It was well furnished, but plainly showed the lack of a woman's hand. Cigarette burns blotched the furniture and discarded butts littered the carpet. Stock journals and mail order catalogs overflowed a polished oak table. Saddlery was heaped in one corner, while in another a Winchester .44 and a spooled bedroll were propped. Leather upholstered rockers were set around. A steer's head, with wide-spread horns, was mounted over a rock fireplace.

Breathing heavily, Bull sank into a rocker. "I'm listening!" he growled.

"You ain't going to like this, Paw," ventured Sam, fidgeting uneasily.

Hard as agate, Bull's eyes bored into him, "Like what?"

"I lost the gold!"

CHAPTER THREE

SAM'S EYES, as blue as Bull's, met the rancher's frowning scrutiny as he awaited his father's reaction. He had expected roaring denunciation, but not a muscle moved on Bull's craggy features. Sheepishly, the young rider told of dropping into The Lone Star to await the stage, and his awakening at dawn.

"Sol!" grunted Bull. "Drunk again!" and his eyes probed the uncomfortable Sam. Then his voice rose in a roaring bellow, "Mark!"

A side door, which had been ajar, opened so abruptly that Sam had a hunch his half-brother had been standing, listening, behind it. Mark stepped into the room.

Bull's elder son was an anomaly. In appearance he was unlike both his father and Sam, resembling nothing so much as a precise accountant who had somehow strayed from a city office into the wild Sweetgrass basin.

A small, compact man, he was brisk and self-contained. Always neatly dressed, he wore a white silk shirt with a conservative cravat, carefully pressed pants and polished shoes. His lean, monkish features were untanned, a sharp acquisitive nose arcing above a mouth as tight as a miser's purse. He seemed younger than his twenty-eight years. His only physical link with his kinfolk lay in his blue eyes, an icy blue, devoid of expression and as hard as bottle glass. Mark abhorred violence—where it concerned himself—he never packed a gun and never touched a playing card, although his hands were as soft and white as a gambler's. His father treated him with habitual contempt, which he frigidly ig-

nored, while a latent hostility had always existed between him and the rough-and-ready Sam. Actually, he was indispensable, handling bookwork that both Bull and Sam despised, keeping tally books and ranch records up to date, purchasing supplies and overseeing legal business.

A generation or more before, Bull had driven a trail herd into Sweetgrass Basin, sided by a long-haired Texan crew, forking apple-horn saddles. Despite raiding Comanches, renegades and rustlers, he'd stuck with stubborn tenacity, until he'd built up the Box and now cows carrying his brand grazed half the Basin.

With prosperity, he craved a wife, and women were ever a rarity in the west. So he imported a "mail order" bride from Chicago, a cool, trim-figured, manicured city product who bartered what she had for what she hoped to get from alliance with a cattle king. She never lived long enough to cash in on the deal, but she gave Bull a son—Mark. Later, the rancher married again, taking a ranch girl from the Basin. The pox carried her off, but she also left a son—Sam.

Around the Basin it was agreed that Sam was a slimmed-down, hell-raising edition of Bull but Mark—they usually spat—hell, who had any use for a lily-fingered bookkeeper? But it was easy to underestimate the dapper Mark.

Chipper as a sparrow, he stood by the door, ignoring Sam. Precisely, he inquired of their father, "You called me?"

"Figured you should hear what I got to say to Sam," rumbled Bull. "The crazy young colt took on a load and lost the dinero." Eying his errant son grimly, the cowman continued, "I reckon that when I foaled you, I bred a useless, muckle-headed scrub. I been acing you out of tights since you were knee-high. A day-old calf got more brains. Wal, I'm thru! You got a hoss and a gun, that's the last you'll ever get from me. Vamoose!"

Sam stared, open-mouthed. He had expected a tongue-lashing, but never this. "See here . . ." he began.

"Git!" barked Bull.

"If that's how you feel, you can go jump plumb into hell," bit back Sam, with taut defiance.

Bull snorted, rose heavily from the rocker and lumbered out of the room.

Still dumbfounded, his younger son stood looking after him.

"You heard dad, Sam!" said Mark crisply, "And I must say he had ample provocation."

Sam moved toward his half-brother, eyes glowering. "What do you mean—provocation?" he grated.

"Another drunken spree and the loss of twelve thousand, gold," returned Mark, with prim emphasis. "There are limits!"

The younger man's rope-calloused hands clenched and unclenched. "I should tear you apart, you sneaking little tailor's dummy," he growled. Then, lifting his shoulders hopelessly, he turned away and headed for the yard.

At the water trough, still numbed by the second shock that day, he mechanically tightened the cinches and swung into leather.

When the buckskin jogged into Buffalo Fork it wheeled from habit, to the rail outside The Lone Star. Sam dismounted, tied the pony and plunked down on the bench that fronted the saloon. For once, he didn't feel like drinking. The long ride from the Box B had given him ample time to reflect upon the tight in which he had landed, and the longer he chewed on the situation the more hopeless it seemed.

Not that he blamed Bull. Soberly reviewing his back trail, he realized that he was in the habit of acting as crazy as popcorn upon a hot stove. Hard riding, hard drinking, hard fighting, he mused, that was the sum of his life. He'd never figured a week ahead and never given a damn what the next day might bring. The record had piled up, until loss of twelve thousand had hammered the last nail in his coffin. What to do? What could he do but ride and rope, as could any run-of-the-mill cowpoke. That paid \$30 and found, if a man was lucky enough to uncover a hole in a spread. Well, he decided, if he had to nurse cows he'd ride out of the Basin

and handle the chore where no-one could poke the finger at him.

Sound of the high-pitched voice inside the saloon switched his thoughts to Fatso, the barkeep who had served him the previous evening. The fat apron was on shift again, maybe he could throw some light on the theft.

It was still early afternoon and there were few punchers in the saloon when he entered. Townsman patronized "The Alamo," down street. From curious glances thrown in his direction he knew that news of his loss had already percolated around.

Fatso was a big, soft man, with bland, owlsh features, in which small, quick-moving eyes were set like to black buttons. Folds of flesh, like a turkey's wattles, hung loose below his jaw. His belly bulged like a balloon beneath his apron.

"Howdy, Sam!" he shrilled, at the sight of the rider, and waddled down the bar. In contrast to his fleshy bulk, his voice was like that of a schoolboy, a squeaky treble. "Guess you crave a hair of the dog that bit you." His wattles quivered with laughter. Then he sobered, "Too bad about that dinerol!"

"Yep!" returned Sam shortly. "Give me a shot of bour-bon!"

"Listen, Fatso," he said, when the fat barkeep had set bottle and glass before him. "You recollect serving me last night?"

"I sure dol" chuckled Fatso. "You were on a high lone-some—most killed a bottle."

"I ordered two fingers when I came in."

"Sure!" agreed the barkeep. "The bottle come later."

"It warn't on the table when I woke up this a.m."

For an instant, Fatso seemed nonplused, then he raised beefy shoulders, "Limpy keeps the empties picked up."

"Any gent help me kill this bottle?" persisted Sam.

"Not a one!" returned the other, with bland emphasis.

"Guess the saloon was kinda crowded."

"Packed like cattle in a car."

"Any strangers around?"

"There's always strangers, riding through. You know that, Sam."

The rider down his drink and turned away. He'd had slightly less than no help from Fatso, and he sure couldn't remember buying a bottle.

Outside again, he stood uncertainly beneath the wooden awning. Dust ballooned as a sorrel pounded down street, its coat shining with sweat. A girl balanced with easy grace in the saddle, her burnished dark hair streaming, Stetson dangling down her back. The puncher's garb she wore, gray shirt and blue denims, yellow bandana loose-knotted around her throat, failed to disguise the curves of her lissome figure. Her red lips, soft rounded features, the smoldering fire in her dark eyes, reflected a vivid beauty. Impetuous Milly Walker was commonly regarded as being "pretty as a heart flush and as explosive as a powder keg." Her mother had died bringing her into the world. Crusty Tom Walker, her father, owner of the Turtle, made no bones of the fact that he'd craved a boy—and he'd proceeded to bring her up as a boy. She could work cattle with the best, ride anything with four legs and rope like an expert. Many a man in the Basin itched to slip a bridle upon this capable bundle of fiery femininity, but the only suitor she would tolerate was Sam Benson.

At sight of Sam, she curbed the sorrel to a sliding stop, swung out of the saddle with steel-spring grace, ground-hitched the pony and ducked under the rail.

Palpitating with excitement, she rushed up to him. On horseback she seemed tall, but, when they stood together, he was a head higher.

"Oh Sam!" she cried, "I'm so sorry!"

"That makes two of us," he drawled.

"We heard of the theft this morning," she continued breathlessly. "I hit for your place. Mark told me about your father. It's a shame, a rotten shame! I'm sure he'll change his mind."

"Bull change his mind!" Sam smiled tightly. "Not on your life!"

"But what will you do?"

"Hightail!"

She clutched his arms, pleading, "Not . . . leave the Basin?"

"Yep!"

She clung to him. "You can't! Listen, Sam. Dad's old. He needs a foreman. We . . ."

"I ain't marrying no ranch!" he cut in, curtly.

"Then take me with you!" she demanded.

Sam's features creased with humorous protest. "Take you—where? I got nothing but a hoss."

"We could get by!" she urged eagerly. "I can ride, rope."

"So we build up a spread!" He dug into a pants pocket, come out with two silver dollars and three brass beer checks.

"On that!" he concluded cryptically.

"Dad started with nothing."

"I started with everything and come down to nothing. Nope, Milly," he decided regretfully, "it just won't work out."

The girl pulled back and stood tense, eyes blazing. "Why don't you say outright you just don't want me?" she flared.

"It ain't that!" he protested.

"What else could it be?" she flashed, and flung away.

As he watched, stony-faced, she vaulted into leather, whirled the sorrel. The animal leapt forward as the rowels dug home. Dust smothered him, stirred up by the flying hooves. For seconds, he stood unmoving, watching horse and rider as they rapidly pulled out of sight. Then, with a resigned shrug, he stepped to the rail, loosed the reins of his own pony, and mounted. Eyes straight ahead, he jogged south, out of town—out of Sweetgrass Basin.

CHAPTER FOUR

WHEN SAM BENSON pulled out of Sweetgrass Basin he neither guessed, nor cared, that most of five years would speed by before he would eye its sun-scorched flats again. Fate, destiny, or maybe just plain chance brought him back, and when the lean buckskin he forked jogged into Buffalo Fork he felt as though he had not been gone five months. Nothing seemed changed. The gray rock front of the county courthouse still frowned upon Main Street; the striped pole of the Bon Ton Barber Shop protruded jauntily as of yore; long-skirted women lingered around the windows of Kaufman's big Mercantile Store; the inevitable row of ponies were tied, droop-hipped, outside The Lone Star saloon.

But there was a difference, which he sensed rather than saw, and his forehead creased in a puzzled frown as he sought to pin it down. Finally he decided that the lurking sense of strangeness lay in himself and not the cowtown.

In truth, time had changed Sam Benson, almost as imperceptibly as it had changed Buffalo Fork. The man who rode in was harder, tougher, more sober than the hard-drinking, careless young colt who had headed south five years before. Though the oldtime recklessness still sparked in his eyes, the easy geniality had fled. His gaze was colder, more watchful, hardened by an uncompromising bleakness. The line of his lips had tightened, too, erasing the laughter wrinkles.

The Border, stamping ground of renegades, rustlers, rowdies of every hue, was a tough training ground for the pampered heir of a big spread. Whether a man survived or

died was dictated by the speed of his draw, the tenacity of his will, the sand in his craw. Sam Benson had survived.

Outside The Lone Star he wheeled to the rail, swung out of leather and loose-knotted the buckskin's reins. Stiff-legged from long hours in the saddle, he pushed through the batwings and paused in the muted light. The first thing he focused when his eyes adjusted from the sun glare outside was the fleshy bulk of Fatso behind the bar. At least the plump barkeep hadn't changed, he thought, except to become more barrel-like and greasier than ever.

As he picked his way between tables scattered over the sanded floor, Fatso paused in the act of idly polishing glasses and looked up. For an instant his black button eyes registered startled surprise, then his moonlike features crinkled jovially. "Well, if it ain't Sam Benson," he squealed, "This sure calls for a drink on the house."

"Howdy, Fatsol" Sam smiled briefly, stepped up to the mahogany, loosed the holster strings that were tied about his right knee, unbuckled his gunbelt and plunked it on the bar.

Plainly puzzled, Fatso eyed the broad leather belt, the plain walnut butt of a .45 protruding from the oil-slick holster, flared to facilitate a quick draw. Then comprehension dawned in his small eyes. He pushed the belt back with a pudgy hand and his flesh wattles quivered with amusement. "Heck, Sam," he said, "the boys quit checking their irons three years back."

"You don't say!" murmured the rider. "Mike O'Dell still sheriff?"

"Yeah!" Sam looked up quickly, focusing Fatso's bland features. He could have sworn he detected lurking contempt in the barkeep's tone.

He shrugged, swung the gunbelt around his middle. "Draw me a mug of beer," he said.

"Beer!" echoed Fatso, who was tilting a bottle of bourbon. Puzzled, his piggish eyes dwelt on Sam.

"That's what I said," returned the rider, his lips quirking at the sight of the surprise reflected on the barkeep's moonlike countenance.

Fatso raised beefy shoulders and reached for a mug.

With his mug of beer, Sam headed for a side table, dropped onto a chair and relaxed. For no good reason, the fat bar-keep always irritated him. Building a cigarette, he considered the surprising laxity of Sheriff O'Dell. It just wasn't like Mike, he reflected. From the day he took office, O'Dell had rigidly enforced the edict "No guns in town." First thing every puncher, and every stranger, did when he rode in was check his gun at the nearest saloon or in the sheriff's office. To be caught packing a gun on Main Street meant a night in the hoosegow—and no alibis.

He sipped his beer, touched a match to his smoke and, from long habit, took stock of those around him. It was early afternoon. There were few patrons in the saloon, but, like the town, they seemed imperceptibly different. Quickly, he pinpointed the reason why. In the old days he had liquored up with good-natured joshing punchers. The scattering of hombres now lining the bar and sprawled at tables were hard-faced, unsmiling. Their guns were mostly thonged down and their sun-scorched faces were somehow tensed, forever alert. "Cat-eyed" was the term, he thought. There was a sead of these hombres on the Border. They were more familiar with the feel of a six-gun than a branding iron. Where honest-to-goodness punchers accumulated saddlesores for thirty-and-found, they drew a hundred and cartridges. A range war drew them like buzzards to a carcass. Seemed Sweetgrass Basin had changed, plenty.

Idly, he found himself absorbing snatches of talk from two riders splitting a bottle at a nearby table: "Hear The Three quit hiring—Frying Pan kin used gunhands, likewise the Sash . . . What they pay? Hell, the usual, a hundred smackers."

Thoughtfully, Sam downed what was left of his beer and moved toward the batwings, heading for the courthouse.

When he stepped inside the Sheriff's Office, O'Dell's burly form was hunched at the ancient rolltop desk. At sound of Sam's tinkling spur chains, the sheriff pivoted slowly around, and Sam had difficulty masking his surprise at sight of the

lawman's changed appearance. O'Dell slumped in his chair like a loose sack of wheat. The iron had gone out of him. He seemed to have shrunk. His vest, formerly well filled, hung loose. His once florrid features were drawn. Wrinkles criss-crossed his broad forehead. When he spoke his voice was a toneless echo of his once hearty boom. "Wal," he greeted, "if it ain't Sam Benson! Folks figured you wormfeed."

"You look like you got one foot in the grave yourself," commented Sam. He hooked up a chair, dropped onto it and coolly looked the sheriff over.

O'Dell raised his shoulders. Somehow, the gesture seemed helpless, hopeless. "A man ages," he returned, and, with a flash of the old style, pulled a cigar out of a vest pocket, bit off the end and clamped it between his teeth.

Sam scratched a match, held it to the cigar and then began to roll a smoke for himself.

"Howcome you quit enforcing the 'no gun' law?" he inquired.

"Times change," returned O'Dell somberly. "The Three rod the Basin now."

"And who in hell might The Three be?"

For a moment O'Dell's dull eyes questioned him, then the sheriff's features creased in a mirthless smile. "I forgot, you been away for years. Mark, Turman and Deuce Durkin rule the roost."

"Mark!" exclaimed the rider. "Don't Bull have a say?"

"Bull checked out—heart attack—six months after you left."

Sam remembered. Doc Heaton, the overworked cowtown medico, had warned Bull to ease up and avoid physical exertion. But the gruff old cowman just shrugged his warnings off and tossed the pills Doc left into a garbage bucket. "So the Old Man sacked his saddle!" he commented soberly. "And Mark rods the Box. Tod Turman still foreman?"

"Tod took over the Lazy E."

Sam looked his surprise. "So Eisner sold out! What in thunder did Turman use for dinero?"

"I wouldn't know," returned O'Dell. He seemed evasive.

"Mark, Turman and Deuce!" murmured Sam. It still didn't make sense, nothing made sense. Puzzled, he said to O'Dell, "Seems they got you boggered, Mike. How come?"

The sheriff mutely lifted his shoulders.

It was plain that the burly sheriff wouldn't talk. Just how had this Three got the Indian sign on him?

The Three! Sam's lips unconsciously curled in derision. Mark, a bookkeeper who shied at sight of a gun; Tod Turman, a rough, tough gun-bully; Deuce Durkin, lily-fingered gambler. What a combination!

How come Turman, who had regularly dribbled away his wages across the poker table in The Lone Star, laid his hands on enough dinero to buy The Lazy E? And what had Mark in common with Deuce Durkin, owner of The Lone Star? Just how did this ill-assorted trio climb to the top of the heap? And how come the cattlemen in the Basin allowed them to rule the roost?

He glanced at the sheriff, moodily puffing the cigar, a dozen questions on his lips, then checked them. O'Dell was as spiritless as a whipped dog. He'd never get the straight out of Mike. "Wal," he announced briskly, "guess I'll drift."

The sheriff watched somberly as he rose, then O'Dell cleared his throat. "Sam," he rumbled, "don't start any devilment, or you'll be buzzard bait. No-one bucks The Three."

The tall rider smiled. "To Hell with The Three!" he returned caustically. "And, for Gawd's sake, Mike, perk up!"

Eyes dreary, O'Dell chewed the cigar and watched him leave.

Deep in thought, Sam dropped down the courthouse steps and drifted along the plankwalk. Bull dead, Mark, Turman and the saloon man riding high. Mike O'Dell acting like all the sand had run out of him. Ranchers hiring gunfighters. Things were sure in one heck of a mess. Just what was happening in Sweetgrass Basin? Someone must have the answer.

He sighted Julius Kaufman's chunky form, framed in the doorway of the Mercantile Store. A smooth-featured, soberly-clad man in his fifties, with calm shrewd eyes set deep

beneath bushy brows and sharp nose curving above a deep, square jaw, Sam remembered Kaufman as the most respected citizen in Buffalo Fork. A generation back the storekeeper had wandered into the Basin leading a pack mule heavy laden with patent medicines, pots and pans. Persistently, year after year, he peddled his goods to punchers, homesteaders, ranchers. Finally, he opened a trading post at Buffalo Fork, then no more than a stage station. Now he owned the Basin's largest store, was President of the Cattlemen's Bank, had amassed wealth. Some called Kaufman tight-fisted, but Sam knew there were plenty shirt-tail ranchers in the Blackwater Hills and out-of-luck townsmen who lived on the storekeeper's bounty. Year after year, he carried them on his books with little prospect of payment. And no deserving family ever appealed in vain to Kaufman for a grub stake.

The storekeeper and Bull, both pioneers in the Basin, had been close friends. If anyone would give him the lowdown it was Kaufman.

" 'Member me, Sam Benson?" he inquired, sauntering up to the storekeeper.

Kaufman's probing gaze ran over his tall, loose-knit form, lingered on the thonged-down six-gun.

"So the prodigal returns!" he commented, and Sam couldn't decide if the storekeeper was friendly, hostile or just cautious.

CHAPTER FIVE

"SINCE THERE'S no fatted calf around, guess I got to get busy." Sam touched his gun. "Who's hiring—and for what?"

Kaufman stood weighing him, then jerked his head toward the store. "Step inside!" he invited.

Sam dogged him down one of several long aisles, flanked by polished counters, behind which shirt-sleeved clerks were busy tending customers. Shelves, ceiling high, were stacked with every variety of merchandise; showcases displayed watches, jewelry, firearms. Overhead, buckets, chairs, hanging lamps dangled from the rafters. The Mercantile, considered Sam, always had been crammed with more merchandise than a mail order catalog.

The storekeeper stepped into a small, glass-partitioned office in the rear. A steel safe sat in one corner, a filing cabinet in another. These, with rows of neatly shelved catalogs, and an ink-stained roll-top desk, left space for little more than two chairs.

Kaufman dropped onto one and nodded at the other. Again his eyes focused the thonged-down holster. "So your gun's for hire?"

Sam smiled. "Maybe so," he admitted, "but I crave the lowdown before I pick up cards."

"I'm disappointed in you, Sam," the other told him quietly. "A tumbleweed, living by his gun! Your father was the biggest man in the Basin and you had many of his attributes."

The rider's lips twitched with inward amusement. Kaufman hadn't changed. The chunky storekeeper never minced matters. He always laid it right on the line. "We don't

need gunman here," continued the storekeeper forcibly. "We need lawmen—honest lawmen!"

"You got Mike O'Dell and his deputies!"

"O'Dell!" The exclamation rang with contempt. "A hiring! There's no law in Sweetgrass Basin."

Sam looked bewildered. "You don't say!"

The storekeeper leaned back in his chair, fingers laced across his middle. "Yes," he continued, with flat fatalism, "it sounds fantastic, but it's true, only too true. After Bull's death rustling broke out. The principal sufferer was Jack Eisner of the Lazy E. Eisner was looted blind and word went around that Tod Turman, who was ramroding the Box for Mark, was behind it. Finally Eisner sold to Turman, for cash I believe."

"Where would Turman raise the dinero?" interjected Sam. "He couldn't keep a dollar."

Kaufman smiled slightly. "Not from the bank! And we all under-estimated your half-brother Mark. Mark developed into a cold-blooded, unscrupulous genius. His was the brain that directed Turman's operations. Tying up with Deuce Durkin, the saloon man, he obtained control of the county political machine. Every office holder became his tool. All this, naturally, took time, but when the Basin finally woke up, The Three—Mark, Turman and Durkin—were in control. Mark even took over our only newspaper, *The Sweetgrass Sentinel*—foreclosed a mortgage on the plant."

"But how come there's a slew of gunslicks around town?" broke in Sam.

"Enforcement!" replied Kaufman cryptically. "Naturally, The Three met opposition, the larger ranchers still oppose them. Turman, backed by his cohorts, is systematically whittling them down, rustling their stock, stampeding their herds, stirring up trouble. And he has at least forty armed men to back his hand. The whole Basin is in a ferment."

"And the ranchers are hiring gunhands to kick back!"

Kaufman nodded. "Exactly, but they lack organization, they fight as individuals. The Three are crushing them, one by one. The situation is desperate."

BATTLING BUCKEROOS

"Seems the guts of all the law abiding citizens around the Basin turned to fiddlestrings," commented Sam.

The storekeeper smiled wearily. "Who can stop The Three? They control the press, the county, the sheriff. They have the guns to blast away opposition."

"And no-one got the sand to do a damn thing about it!" The disgust in Sam's voice was plain.

"What can any man do?" There was an undertone of hopelessness in Kaufman's deep voice. "I even took the stage to the capital and laid the situation before legislators, interviewed the governor. All were sympathetic, but they have done nothing. They probably regarded me as a crackpot. Mark has a man at Austin, too. That cold-blooded exploiter overlooks nothing."

Chewing a cold cigarette, Sam sat absorbing Kaufman's story. It seemed incredible, three men terrorizing an entire county. Abruptly, he queried, "How come they de-horned Mike O'Dell?"

"He takes orders or quits," replied Kaufman stonily. "Mike has a wife and five growing children. He's been sheriff for too many years to throw everything away—now."

"They got you hogtied, too?"

"No man hogties me!" replied the storekeeper, his voice hardening. "I'm a business man. I run my business and keep out of politics. I do know this, if The Three are not checked, the Basin will become a jungle, fit only for renegades. Well," he measured Sam with deepset eyes, "perhaps I have talked too freely."

"Guess you laid it on the line," returned Sam. "I'd say that Mark holds all the aces."

"Our only hope," confessed Kaufman, "was to persuade the Governor to send in the Texas Rangers and clean up the whole filthy mess. Now I realize that hope was futile."

Sam came to his feet. "I sure thank you for the lowdown," he drawled. "The Basin has sure gone plumb to hell." He touched his holster. "I see a right busy time ahead."

"A gunslick's paradise!" threw back the storekeeper curtly and turned to his desk.

BATTLING BUCKEROOS

Outside the store, Sam stood hesitant, his mind still on Kaufman's revelations. He remembered his pony was still tied outside The Lone Star and sauntered across street. Mounting, he ambled down to Wiggins' Livery and Wagon Yard, bulging like a huge paint-peeling box at the south end of Main Street.

When he headed into the big barn no-one seemed to be around. Walt Wiggins, he guessed, still took a long afternoon siesta, with a bottle of rotgut. He watered the buckskin, uncinched the saddle, set it on a rack and spread the saddle blanket. Removing the bridle, he slipped on a hackamore, spilled grain liberally into a feed bin. While the pony munched eagerly, he rubbed it down with a gunny sack, removing caked sweat and trail dust.

The pony tended to, he slung his saddlebags over a shoulder and hit for the clapboard Buffalo Hotel. The leather rockers in the little square lobby were shabbier than ever, and he guessed the fly-specked front windows hadn't been washed since he rode out. Dropping a dollar on the counter, he picked up the key the spectacled clerk dropped beside it and jingled up the carpetless stairway to his room.

When he dropped down the stairs again he became aware that one of the shabby leather rockers held an occupant, a woman. His cursory downward glance became fixed and his pulse speeded as he realized it was Mildred Walker, the girl he had left behind five years before.

She was still as pretty as a heart flush, he considered, his pace slowing, but she'd changed plenty from the stormy, impetuous firebrand who had tornadoed down Main Street on that tragic day. She seemed subdued, almost demure. Her dark hair was neatly gathered beneath a small bonnet and she wore a dress of sober hue that flowed almost to her shoes. Buttoned high, it was secured at her throat by a plain gold broach. The effect was to make her seem older, school teacherish, although the red lips, soft rounded features and dark eyes showed no change.

When he reached the bottom stair she glanced up to meet

his eyes and, close now, he revised his opinion. Mildred Walker HAD changed. Her tight lips marked repression. Her face was thinner, and somehow harder. Dullness had replaced the devilment in her eyes. This was not the joyous, high-spirited girl he had known.

"Mildred!" he hailed. "This is sure one pleasant surprise."

She rose quickly and, for a moment, as her lips parted and recognition glowed in her eyes, softening her features, she seemed suddenly to erase the years.

"Welcome back, Sam!" she smiled, extending both hands. There was a caress in her voice.

"I scarce rode in," he said, brown paws enveloping her small hands. "How come you heard?"

"Chance!" she replied lightly. "I was in town and Mr. Kaufman at the store told me you had just left him."

Self-consciously, Sam realized that he was still tightly grasping her hands and the desk clerk was gaping owlishly at them through thick-lensed spectacles, eagerly assimilating every word. He released his grip and commented lamely, "So you guessed I'd put up at the hotel. Wal, it's been a long time!"

"Five years—five centuries!" she said soberly.

He glanced awkwardly at the clerk and put in hastily, "I was heading for the New York Grill."

"And I'm dying for a cup of coffee!"

"Wal, that means Ah Wing gets two customers," he returned jovially, and followed as she turned and rustled toward the glass-panelled street door.

Both were silent as they paced the few steps to the restaurant; Sam conscious of long-dormant, deep-stirring emotions and the girl distant with deep thoughts of her own.

Sam steered the girl to a side table, where they could talk with comparative privacy.

"So Mark's the big augur in the Basin now," he commented, when they'd settled down.

"Big!" She raised her eyebrows. "So big!" She held up a hand, thumb and forefinger almost touching.

BATTLING BUCKEROOS

He grinned. "The Three been bothering your paw's spread?"

She smiled tightly, "His father-in-law!"

Sam froze as the import of the words sank home, then asked quietly, "What was that you said?"

"Didn't you know? I married Mark the year after you left."

CHAPTER SIX

MILDRED MARRIED to Mark! Sam felt as though a mule had unexpectedly kicked him—square in the stomach. He could do no more than sit and stare at the girl. He knew that Mark had been one of Mildred's many admirers, but she had always treated his precise half-brother with indifferent contempt. As for marrying Mark, it seemed impossible.

"Surprised?"

He shook his head at the blunt query, groping for words.

"I never thought . . ." he began, and stopped.

"I was worth riding home for," she put in, bitterly.

"No Milly," he said quickly, "you got it wrong."

"What was I supposed to think?" she demanded, the old challenging flash in her dark eyes. "For six months after you left I waited . . . hoping. Then your father died. Mark wanted you to return and claim your inheritance. You ignored him, and me." Her voice shook with emotion. "I was half-crazed with shock and frustration. Mark was kind—then. He begged me to marry him. Don't think I haven't regretted it, every hour!"

Sam's mind was functioning now and his forehead creased as he listened. There was something here he didn't understand. "What was that about Mark, wanting me to return?" he asked.

"He had Mr. Snodgrass, the lawyer, insert his plea in every newspaper through the entire country. Bull left half the Box to you. When we heard nothing, the Court awarded the ranch to Mark." She glanced at the thonged-down gun. "I suppose you were too busy killing!"

BATTLING BUCKEROOS

When Sam saw the girl off in her buggy he made a bee-line for his hotel room. He craved to be alone, to think. Stretched on the creaky bed, eyes closed, he reviewed the past. When he left Sweetgrass Basin he had drifted along the Border. At Del Rio he'd taken a riding job with a big company outfit, the Currycomb, to earn bacon and beans. San Angelo and San Antonio newspapers came regularly to the bunkhouse, to be passed around, read and reread, until they were dog-eared shreds. Always, he'd searched for news of the Basin, but had never found one item relating to Buffalo Fork or the Box B. If he'd overlooked a notice carrying his name, it was a cinch some Currycomb waddy would have called his attention to it.

After eight months at the Currycomb, he pondered, he'd drifted on. That was two months after Mildred claimed those announcements had been inserted in every newspaper. Suspicion began to take shape in his mind. Mark had stolen his girl, had his half-brother robbed him of his inheritance, too?

Sam only knew Samuel Snodgrass, the lawyer, by sight and he was never impressed by what he saw. Snodgrass was a stocky little man going to fat, with pasty features that always reminded the rider of the underside of a dead fish. He affected a black clawhammer coat, white ruffled shirt and black string tie. The only thing notable about him was his voice, as deep and sonorous as a bass drum. He dabbled in politics and gloried in Fourth of July oratory. He wasn't Bull's regular attorney, yet Mark had chosen him to administer the estate. Why?

At nine o'clock the following morning, Sam clumped up the wooden outside stairway that slanted up to the lawyer's office over the Bon Ton Barber Shop.

Snodgrass was yawning at the table he used as desk when the gritty hinges of the screen door squealed. Immediately, he grabbed some papers and began scrutinizing them intently.

Sam stepped inside and began casually looking around. This was his first visit to the lawyer's office and he was not impressed. The table behind which Snodgrass sat was smothered with neat stacks of documents, mute testimony to the

volume of his activities. Sunlight, however, slanting through a window, somewhat spoiled the effect by revealing the thick layer of dust that covered them. Against a side wall, a glass-fronted bookcase held yellowing volumes. The lawyer's black coat and soft hat hung from hooks. With two straight back chairs, an ancient oak filing cabinet and a square of threadbare carpet, this completed the furnishings. The general impression was one of musty decay.

Snodgrass finally looked up and blinked at his visitor. Sam could have sworn that his watery eyes held furtive unease.

"Can this be the younger Benson?" he intoned.

"It can—and is," grunted Sam, twisting a straightback chair around and plumping onto it.

The lawyer displayed yellow teeth in a quick smile. "Possibly I can be of service?"

"You sure can!" Sam told him vigorously and began to fashion a smoke.

"Well, sir, proceed!" boomed Snodgrass. He waved a pudgy hand over the crowded table top. "As you perceive, I am a very busy man."

"I crave the lowdown on paw's will!"

For no apparent reason, the lawyer pulled out a white cambric handkerchief and dabbed his forehead, but when he spoke his voice was urbane, "A simple, straightforward document, sir. The estate was left jointly to the descendant's two sons. If, within a reasonable period, either could not be located, the estate would revert to the other."

"And the Box reverted to Mark?"

Snodgrass spread his hands. "Naturally!" He cleared his throat, "after every effort had been made to locate you."

"Such as?" queried Sam laconically.

"Announcements were inserted in all principal newspapers throughout the south-west."

"That would take in 'The San Angelo Press' and 'San Antonio Weekly News'?"

"Of course!"

"You're a crook and a liar!" announced Sam deliberately. Dull-red stained the lawyer's pasty cheeks. "How dare you!"

he choked and jumped to his feet. "Get out of my office—this very instant!"

Sam's right hand blurred down and his .45 flicked out, lined on the plump, gesticulating lawyer.

"Snodgrass," he snapped, "button up, if you don't crave to be buzzard bait."

Slowly the lawyer's arms sagged as he eyed the gun. Wordlessly, he sank down onto his chair, mouth gaping.

Sam nodded in the direction of the oak cabinet, "You got a file on the Benson estate, yank it out!"

The lawyer slumped, hesitant, and the hammer click as Sam cocked his gun was loud. "I ain't particular," he said, "if I leave you dead, or alive."

Fearful eyes on the levelled gun, Snodgrass rose and backed to the cabinet. Turning his back hesitantly, he slid open a drawer and lifted out a wad of papers, tied with red tape. He moved back and dropped them on the table.

"Back against the wall!" directed Sam curtly. The attorney shuffled backward until he brought up against the rear wall.

Sam eased down the hammer and dropped his gun into leather. Then he slipped off the tape and spread the Benson documents. First was a crackling sheet emblazoned, "Last Will & Testament." He set it aside and picked up a sheet upon which a newspaper clipping was pasted, labelled "Sweetgrass Sentinel." He read:

\$100 Reward

will be paid for information leading to the whereabouts of Samuel Benson, son of "Bull" Benson, deceased, formerly of Sweetgrass Basin. Secundo Snodgrass, Attorney-at-Law, Buffalo Fork, Texas.

He laid the clipping aside and riffled through the remaining papers. They were routine; an inventory of ranch equipment, stock tallies, receipted tax bills, death certificate, a court order.

"Where's the clippings from all them other papers?" he inquired, looking up.

Snodgrass licked his lips. "I kept only one . . . for reference," he quavered.

The dirty little crook, reflected Sam; guilt was plastered all over his map. Aloud, he asked, "You telling me you got no record of payment for the insertions?"

The lawyer said nothing, just stood sweating.

Sam rose and rounded the table. Snodgrass shrank back at sight of the anger reflected in his cold blue eyes. "Let me tell you just what you did do," gritted the rider. "You ran one piece, in the 'Sweetgrass Sentinel' knowing I'd never see it. Then you swore in Probate Court that you'd advertised all over and got the order that gave Mark the Box. How much did he cut you in for?"

"Nothing!" declared Snodgrass, "I received a mere retainer."

Sam's right arm swung and his hard palm took the lawyer across the face. Snodgrass staggered. Before he could recover, the rider gathered the front of the white ruffled shirt. He shook the terrorized lawyer until finally Snodgrass drooped limp, a dead weight. When Sam released his grip, the pudgy man sank to the floor, a palpitating heap.

"How much?" reiterated Sam, "Or do I have to really work you over?"

"A thousand dollars!" gasped Snodgrass hoarsely.

"Guess you're tied up with The Three," mused Sam, "so I've got no legal recourse. Wal . . ." he reached for his gun.

"No, no!" begged the lawyer. He clawed frantically at the rider's legs.

"You just ain't worth a slug!" Sam's voice held vast disgust. He pulled away and headed for the door.

That evening, when he pushed through the batwings of The Lone Star, talk droned loud, punctured by expletives, and the air was heavy with drifting tobacco smoke. Plainly the saloon was doing a land office business. Yellow light from the brass oil lamps suspended overhead illumined the rough range garb and bronzed features of riders clustered thick

along the bar and gathered around liquor-stained tables. In one corner, Deuce Durkin, the proprietor, the diamond in his stickpin a fiery spark, presided over a poker game.

A bunch of Turman's boys must be in town, reflected Sam, his glance flicking over harsh, sunblasted faces and cartridge-studded gunbelts. Fatso was off shift. Sweating, his replacement darted up and down the bar, striving to keep up with a barrage of orders. Sam was trying to attract his attention when a heavy hand thudded between his shoulder-blades, and a voice grated, "Howdy, stranger!"

He swivelled to face a gaunt, elongated puncher. Clad in dusty gray shirt and Levi's, a bright red bandana knotted around his scrawny neck, the newcomer stood a hand higher than himself. A tangle of jet-black hair curled over his ears and his eyes were fathomless dark pools. Swarthy high-boned features creased in a grin, he stood looking down at Sam.

"I'll be damned!" ejaculated the rider joyfully. "You're a sight for sore eyes, Cherokee, you old son-of-a-gun!"

Delightedly, they thumped each other.

Sam had helled around plenty with the 'breed in the old days, when Cherokee busted broncs at the Box. He'd found the tall, gaunt rider to be a kindred spirit, a staunch side-kick who always delivered in a tight.

Mugs of beer in their hands, they located an unoccupied table and eagerly traded talk.

And Sam learned plenty. Cherokee wasn't happy, although his wages had skyrocketed. "Ain't no more punchers," explained the 'breed, "just fighting hands." Many of the original crew had drifted away and the bunkhouse was packed with strangers.

Turman's specialty, as Sam had suspected, was running off stock from ranches that defied The Three. These rustled cows were held in box canyons deep in the Blackwater Hills, and their brands worked over. When a gather reached sufficient size, the stolen beef was hazed south, across the Border. Right then, Turman was keeping his night riders busy, building up for a big drive.

"Ain't you scairt of the law, you doggoned brandblotcher?" inquired Sam, with the frankness of an old pard.

"Law!" grunted Cherokee, and chuckled with amusement. "Hell, Sam, there ain't no law in the Basin."

Sam carefully made a cigarette, searching in his mind for the right approach to a plan that was slowly taking shape in his mind. "I could use a little dinero," he said offhand, "Turman hiring?"

The 'breed shook his head decisively. "Not you, Sam! Tod just naturally hates your guts."

"And I reckon," threw out the rider carelessly, "Turman's no pard of yourn?"

Cherokee merely spat.

"You acquainted with the set-up?"

"I been rustling beef for months," said the 'breed simply.

"So you're wise as to where they deliver—and collect?"

"We deliver in the San Domingo Mountains, eight miles south of Santa Anita, and the greasers ante up ten dollars a head," rasped Cherokee.

"Your cut?"

"There ain't no cut. The Box pays an even hundred a month, rain or shine."

"Just supposing," ruminated Sam, "I could line up five, six fighting rannies, pick up a big bunch, say a thousand head, and run 'em over the Border. We'd split even. Should mean \$1500 or \$1600 apiece. That sound loco?"

"It sure does," growled Cherokee. "How you gonna gather a thousand head with Turman's riders spread over the Basin and punchers on every outfit riding night guard?"

"I waren't figuring on gathering nothing," returned Sam blandly. "What's to prevent me lifting Turman's big herd after he gets it fixed up for the drive south?"

CHAPTER SEVEN

CHEROKEE STARED across the table, excitement building in his eyes. "Doggone it, Sam," he ejaculated, "you got the gall to do it."

"Easy as slutting a gut," threw back Sam. "I'm counting you in. Then we'll need five, six more hombres with plenty gravel in their gizzards, and you should be able to put the finger on them."

Cherokee sipped his beer, considering. "Guess there's quite a pasel got no use for Turman," he admitted. "Some of the old crew still stick around. If they quit there's nothing for them in the Basin."

"Wal, I got something that makes \$100 and found look like chickenfeed," said Sam. "You line up the boys. Two days from now hit for town and bring them along. You ain't committed. We'll get together and I'll spread my hand."

"Sure will," agreed the 'breed. And knowing Cherokee, Sam knew the bronc buster would deliver.

Their minds full of the possibilities of Sam's scheme, the pair relaxed, chewing their quirlies and eying the surge of patrons around. The shambling roustabout known as Limpy was drifting from table to table, gathering empty bottles and mugs. Like most saloon men, Deuce kept the empties picked up. If a fight developed, bottles, the bottoms knocked off, were dangerous weapons.

The half-wit limped up and reached for their empty mugs.

"How's tricks, Limpy?" inquired Sam, good-naturedly.

The derelect's vacant glance drifted over him, then remembrance stirred in Limpy's bleary eyes. "If it ain't Mr. Sam, back again. The pill cured you, like Fatso said."

Sam smiled, "I didn't swallow no pill, Limpy."

"You sure did," insisted the other earnestly. "Fatso dropped it in your drink. He said you were sick. I remember plain, it was the night you lost all that gold."

Sam tensed as recollection of that dawn awakening returned. No drunk had ever affected him like that before. His head had felt as though it were filled with boiling lead. "So that was it!" he exclaimed and his chair crashed backward as he jumped to his feet.

Cherokee eyed him, wondering. The rider swung around to face him. "Fatso, that stinking sack of slop, fed me a knockout drop and lifted Paw's twelve thousand," he grated, and headed for the bar, elbowing a path across the crowded saloon. Ignoring angry curses, he pushed up to the bar and demanded of the perspiring apron, "Where's Fatso?"

"I wouldn't know, mister," replied the barkeep. "He went off shift at sundown."

Sam pulled away, spied Durkin at the poker table and plunged toward him.

Deuce Durkin was a plump roly-poly, of devious antecedents and deceptive demeanor, who dressed precisely in sober black, with spotless white linen. A huge solitaire sparkled in the stickpin that centered his black cravat. His manner was suave and his pale features, smooth-shaven, were a mask of cherubic affability, belied by a pair of hard gray eyes.

When Sam bulled up to the poker table, Deuce was dealing with carefully manicured fingers. Sam grabbed his right shoulder, but he continued to deal impassively, ignoring the interruption, except for a soft, carefully controlled, "Watch it, feller!"

Blue eyes blazing, Sam spun him around in his chair. No one had ever seen Deuce lose his smiling aplomb and this occasion proved no exception. While the players hunched around the table glared angrily at Sam, the gambler merely pushed up his eye shade and calmly looked his assailant over. "Well, well!" he commented cordially, "If it isn't young Sam Benson. Long time, no see, Sam!"

The rider released his grasp. "Where's that greasy Fatso hog?" he demanded.

"Simmer down!" advised Deuce blandly. "What do you want with Fatso?"

"The sidewinder doped me and grabbed Paw's twelve thousand, five years back."

Someone at the table laughed, another injected impatiently, "Throw him out! The hombre's whisky crazy." But Deuce smiled placatingly. "Why brace me?" he inquired. "We've got a sheriff to handle lawbreakers."

"I handle this!" barked Sam. "Where'll I find the skunk?"

Deuce raised his well-tailored shoulders. "In his shack, I guess, on Whisky Flat."

Sam made a beeline for the batwings. When he stepped outside, he found Cherokee at his heels. Pulling up beside him as he hurried across the broad stretch of Main Street, the 'breed urged, "Don't go off half-cocked. Limpy's been off his mental reservation for years."

"For once he hit the bull's-eye," retorted Sam, and plugged ahead.

Whisky Flat was a brushy stretch between Main Street and Medicine Creek, where down-and-outers and a smattering of single men hung out, living in a motley of ramshackle huts and cabins. Decent citizens avoided the Flat; its quota of killings was high and the characters of its inhabitants dubious.

The two traversed a narrow alley and emerged upon a level expanse, littered with debris from the stores and etched with shadow. On the far side, chaparral, thick-patched, loomed black, pierced here and there by a glimmer of light from an unshaded window.

Picking their way through discarded barrels, boxes and other assorted rubbish, the two headed for the chaparral. Pushing through thick brush, they hit for the nearest light. When they beat up to it, four saddlebums were visible through an open doorway, all slightly befuddled, slapping cards around an upturned barrel and drinking hooch. None knew where Fatso hung out.

Cherokee tagging behind, Sam again pushed through tangled brush. Time sped as he made inquiry at three more cabins that showed light, but the location of Fatso's hideaway still remained a mystery. Then they hit upon a ragged oldtimer, hunkered on the stoop of a weathered shack, jaws stolidly working on a chew. Yep, he allowed, he was acquainted with the location of Fatso's dicehouse. But he displayed no inclination to disclose it.

Impatiently, Sam tossed him a silver dollar. In no haste, the oldtimer came to his feet and led them along a winding path toward the creek. At water's edge, he nodded at the dim outline of a cabin upstream. "There y'are gents," he drawled, and moved off into the darkness.

Again they fought brush and broke out in front of a solid clapboard cabin, with railed porch and darkened windows. Sam jerked his gun and took the three wooden steps that led up to the porch with a bound. The door swung open at his vigorous kick and he burst inside. Nothing moved. Cherokee struck a match and touched it to the wick of an oil lamp, set on a small table.

Yellow light bloomed, and they looked around the one room. It was poorly furnished; the table, a padded rocker and one straight back chair set on the bare plank floor. At one end a stove pipe angled up to the roof from a small sheetiron stove; clothing hung from spikes along a wall and, at the further end, blankets were rumpled upon a built-in bunk.

Sam stepped up to the bunk and thrust a hand under the blankets. They were warm. "The sidewinder was here, sleeping, not five minutes back," he announced, with disgust. "Someone sent him word."

"Ain't far he can run," rasped Cherokee. "Reckon you'll corner the coyote at sun-up." Sam blew out the lamp and they made their way back to Main Street.

Cherokee forked his bronc and pulled out. Sam jingled along the plankwalk back to his hotel room. It was useless hunting Fatso in the darkness, there were a score of spots where he could hole up. Given daylight, thought Sam

grimly, he'd comb the town. And if the fat barkeep had beat it on a saddlehorse, he'd stick to the skunk's trail until he had saddlesores.

Back at the hotel, he yanked off his boots and stood at the window of his room, staring out at the dark canyon that was Main Street and moodily sucking a cigarette, resigning himself to waiting for daylight. If Limpy had only loosened his yap the morning following the loss of the gold, he reflected ruefully, the last five years would have been a heap different. Right now he'd be half owner of the Box. Suddenly, he stiffened at a thought—how did Fatso know he was packing twelve thousand gold in that gunnysack? To all appearances, its contents were valueless. He had divulged his mission to no-one, and he was sure cold sober when he swallowed that knock-out drop. Someone tipped the barkeep off, and that "someone" must have been Mark. No-one else, outside of Bull knew he packed the gold. Well, he thought, with smoldering anger, he'd choke the truth out of Fatso, come sun-up.

Finally, he unbuckled his gunbelt, looped it on a post of the brass bed and stretched out, to sink into uneasy sleep . . . the abrupt impact of a hand grasping his shoulder brought him awake. Filtering through the window, the wan light of dawn revealed the dim form of a man standing over him. Another looked in the open doorway. Alert in a flash, he jerked to a sitting position and figured his chance of grabbing the .45 from his gunbelt hanging beyond his left shoulder.

Then the man above him spoke, "Yank on your boots, Sam, I'm taking you in." And he knew it was Sheriff O'Dell.

"Quit funning, Mike," he grunted, and swung his legs to the floor. Just what was the shenanigans all about, he wondered. Could be Snodgrass had sworn out a warrant for assault and battery.

"Ain't much fun about a killing," returned O'Dell. He lifted the gunbelt off the bedpost and slung it to the deputy standing in the doorway.

Sam looked up sharply, "A killing?"

"Quit sidestepping!" snorted the sheriff. "We found Fatso's

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carcass in his cabin, the back of his head blown off. We got witnesses to swear you were helling on his trail last night. And we located the hombre who led you to the cabin. You're due to swing, Sam."

CHAPTER EIGHT

FATSO DEAD! Sam's first reaction was a surge of frustration. It was plain the fat barkeep had been murdered to close his mouth. The man, or men, who'd used him for a tool had been scared he'd talk. Then he chilled with cold shock as he realized his own position.

"You're loco, Mikel!" he threw back. "Sure, I was hellbent to corral the fat slob, but he ducked out—his cabin was empty. I've got a witness."

"Save it for the judge," O'Dell told him morosely.

Flanked on one side by the sheriff and on the other by the deputy, the accused man angled across the empty stretch of Main Street, passed locked stores, drummed down the splintery plankwalk and climbed the steps of the grim gray courthouse.

In the sheriff's office, the tight-lipped prisoner emptied his pockets and they booked him on "suspicion of murder."

"Listen, Mike," he appealed. "This is a doggoned frame-up. Don't I get to tell my story?"

"Sure," grunted the sheriff. "I'd say it was an open-and-shut case, but you got the right to make a statement."

Sam told of the roustabout's revelation and his frantic search for Fatso, sided by Cherokee. "Get hold of the 'breed," he concluded. "He'll vouch for every word."

"Maybeso," allowed O'Dell, "but who you got to testify that you didn't backtrack to Fatso's shack after this Cherokee gent rode out? You find the apron snoring on his bunk and blow his brains out."

The prisoner stood silent, then inquired quietly, "You figure I'd blow out a man's brains—from behind?"

"Fatso's dead!" growled O'Dell, but he was plainly uncomfortable.

Sam shrugged hopelessly. "If you had the brains of a bumblebee," he retorted, "you'd know I'm being framed. Five years back, no-one knew I packed that gold outside of Mark. Mark's tied up with Deuce and Turman. One or the other paid Fatso to dope me and lift the twelve thousand. I wise up to Fatso and they're scairt he'll spill his guts. So they rub him out."

"The finger still points at you," returned the sheriff tonelessly. He fished in a drawer, brought out a ring of keys and tossed them to the deputy, "Lock him up!"

The deputy grabbed Sam's arm and swung him around. O'Dell's gruff voice checked them. "Catch!" Sam caught his sack of makin's. Papers and a block of stinkers followed.

Beside a stout door at the end of the corridor, a stable lamp, turned low, hung from a peg. The deputy took the lamp, and motioned the prisoner to descend a broad stairway that slanted into black depths.

His shadow dancing grotesque before him, Sam dropped down the stairs, the deputy clumping behind.

A steel-barred gate clanged behind Sam. From one of a row of cells built in the basement, across the front of the courthouse, he watched the wavering light of the stable lamp wash against stone pillars as it receded, leaving him in utter darkness.

He fumbled across the earthen floor of the cell, found a bench upon which a straw mattress had been dropped and climbed wearily upon it.

Stretched out, his brain a whirlpool of conflicting thought, he struggled to think clearly. He'd never been in a worse jackpot, he reflected somberly, and there seemed no way out. Fatso was dead. Plenty men knew he was hunting the bar-keep, blood in his eye. The finger of guilt pointed straight at him. Unsuspecting, he had blundered blindly into a deadly trap.

His hanging would eliminate any possible chance of Snodgrass's trickery coming to light and Mark being com-

pelled to surrender a half-share of the Box. It would also bury, for ever, the true story of the theft of twelve thousand gold. The Three just *had* to eliminate him. And there was nothing, just nothing, he could do about it.

With no windows beyond barred gratings at ground level, high above the cells, no more than a faint light ever penetrated the courthouse basement. The air was stale, permeated with a sour stench. No sound save that of rats, scampering and squealing in dark recesses, broke the brooding silence.

For two days the prisoner languished in solitude, with nothing to break deadening monotony but the appearance twice daily of a deputy with a tray of chuck. Every hour seemed an eternity to the fretting prisoner. His insistent demand that he be allowed to consult a lawyer was received with poker-faced silence by the stolid jailor. Kaufman had not spoken idly when he said that justice had been banished from Sweetgrass Basin, considered the prisoner bitterly.

Mid-morning of the third day the monotony was broken. Sam, pacing his cell as restlessly as a caged cougar, heard the heavy door at the head of the stairway bang back. Peering between the bars, he saw the jailor descending, a rider wearing a bright red bandana jingling at his heels.

Cherokee approached the cell and stood regarding the prisoner with inscrutable dark eyes. "So you beefed the sidewinder!" he commented, matter-of-factly.

"Like hell I did," returned Sam wrathily. "They framed me!"

"Talk is that you'll swing higher than a kite."

"Before you bulled in I was as sad as a tick-fevered doggie," said Sam with taut humor. "Now I can feel the rope around my gizzard."

"Wal, it's a short drop, and it's sudden," commiserized the breed imperturbably. He moved his head a trifle, to indicate the jailor standing wooden-faced behind him, dropped an eyelid.

"Beat it, you doggoned buzzard," barked Sam, "before you break my heart."

Cherokee turned away. "Techy as a teased snake," he told the jailor sorrowfully.

Alone again in the cavernous basement, Sam thrilled with new-born hope. This was no idle visit. Cherokee was hatching up something and craved to alert him.

Night crept on and the gloom around thickened. Sam waited in the darkness, nerves tight. He had a hunch that whatever devilment the 'breed planned would erupt before sun-up. The hinges of a door grated, the sound loud in the brooding quiet. Light bloomed on the stairway and the prisoner, eagerly watching, glimpsed the forms of two riders. Spur chains jingling, the stable lamp swinging from the hand of one, they descended and crossed the basement at a run. The first was Cherokee, a ring of keys rattling in one hand.

Grumbling with disgust, he tried one key after another in the cell lock, with no success. Then, abruptly, there was a sharp click and Sam yanked the gate open and stepped outside.

"Welcome, Santa Claus!" he exclaimed fervently.

Wasting no time, the three hit for the stairway, pounded up the treads and surged out into the corridor. Subdued light from a lamp bracketted on the wall revealed a rider on lookout at the front door and two other waiting expectantly outside the sheriff's office.

Sam charged into the office. The night deputy slumped across the desk, unmoving. The prisoner lifted his gunbelt and hat from a peg, hastily swung the belt around his middle and clapped on the Stetson. Then he searched the desk drawers, found a bulky envelope in which the contents of his pockets had been sealed.

Outside, faint in the starlight, seven ponies were tied to the rail, a second lookout lounging close by.

Astride the buckskin, Sam breathed deep of the cool, sage-scented air. Yielding to irresistible impulse, he threw back his head and released a joyous "Yipp-ee." Others were piling into leather around him. He gave the buckskin its head

and rowelled. Tail streaming, it drummed down street. Dust fogged as the other riders pounded in his wake.

It was past midnight and nothing moved on the sandy stretch ahead. Alleys were black caves of darkness. No lights showed, except for broad yellow shafts slanting through the squat windows of The Lone Star. Outside the saloon, three ponies drowsed, slackhipped.

Deuce was dealing an all-night poker game, guessed Sam. For no reason, outside of derisive challenge, he jerked his sixgun and loosed a slug at the saloon windows as the buckskin flashed past. Fragments jangled, loud on the night, as glass shattered. More guns boomed behind him as other mad-racing riders loosed lead. The reports reverberated like cannon blasts and the windows of the saloon disintegrated. Then they had swept out of town, thundered over the plank bridge that spanned Medicine Creek and hit the flats.

Sam eased down his hard-breathing mount and Cherokee eased up to his stirrup. "That was sure a sweet delivery," said Sam. "You beef the night deputy?"

"Nopel!" grunted the breed. "Jest clouted the hombre with a gun barrel." As they jogged side by side, the others strung out behind them, he added, "Reckon you should thank the sheriff for the getaway."

"The sheriff!" Sam swung around in the saddle, eying the other with quick surprise.

"Wal," rumbled Cherokee, "he give me the idea. When I dropped into the office and inquired howcome he got the crazy notion Sam Benson could shoot a man from behind, he allowed the idea had stuck in his craw. Said he was kinda bothered, seeing he had only one night guard and you was a desperate character. Wal, a nod's as good as a wink to a blind hoss. I jest naturally aced you out."

Could it be, wondered Sam, that the sheriff, hogtied and bedeviled by The Three, was pulling for him after all. Then he gave his mind to business, "The boys want in?"

"Are they acting bashful?" rasped Cherokee.

"Likely they'll swallow lead."

"Ain't none gunshy," returned the 'breed drily.

For awhile they followed the curves of West Fork, a creek that meandered down into the Basin from the hills. Sam didn't worry overmuch about pursuit. From his knowledge of the terrain, he knew that before daylight they would be deep in the wind-scoured Blackwater Hills. In years past, he dug strays out of the Hills, an ugly, sun-seared tangle of canyon and gulches in which an army could hide.

Sun-up found the bunch of riders winding through up-ended terrain, rock-girded and desolate. Clumped cholla and squat mesquite pocked the starved earth, and the hills that swelled around them glimmered dull-red and coppery-brown in the growing light.

Cherokee cut off into a narrow ravine and their sweat-plastered ponies stirred deep talus, the spill-off of centuries from eroding walls that frowned on either side.

Unexpectedly, verdant green showed ahead and the 'breed reined up where clinging vines festooned the cliff and birds chirped in thick chaparral. When he swung stiffly out of leather, Sam feasted his eyes upon a shaded pool, fed by seepage from the rock wall.

Cinches slackened, the ponies cropped at rank grass that bordered the pool, while their riders flopped in the chaparral and slept. It was near noon when Cherokee's boot nudged Sam into wakefulness. He sat up, eying recombent forms around, moved to awaken the nearest man. The 'breed checked him. "Jest you and me," he said.

Saddling up, they pulled out. The 'breed steered his pony through a labyrinth of hills. Sam was beginning to wonder just what was on his pard's mind when Cherokee wheeled into a shallow draw, swung to the ground and looped his reins on the snag of a storm-blasted juniper. Then he headed for the slope beyond, Sam at his heels. They began to climb upward, over ground freckled with boulders and ribbed with stratas of rust-colored rock. Chest heaving, Sam struggled in Cherokee's wake.

When they neared the ragged sweep of the skyline, the 'breed dropped, yanked off his Stetson and began to worm

ahead. Sam elbowed up beside him as he checked—stared ahead, then emitted a soft, incredulous whistle.

Before them a precipitous talus slope slanted down to a flat, on either side of which rugged precipices shot up. At the far end of the flat, perhaps a mile distant, a jagged cliff completed the enclosure of a box canyon, solidly walled except for a deep cleft.

Clumps of greenery attested to water and the floor of the canyon was specked with cows. "Thick as maggots on a carcass!" muttered Sam. Near by the cleft he focussed a rude shack, a stout corral and chute beside it. As he absorbed the scene, the form of a rider, dwarfed by distance, took shape near the shack. In no haste, the man strolled toward the cleft and vanished between its rocky portals.

"Lookout!" grunted Cherokee. "Turman keeps two hombres up here. That's aplenty."

"What a hideaway!" breathed Sam. "Water, feed, corrals, all tucked away in this Godforsaken malpais."

"All I lamp is ten thousand gold, maybe more—on the hoof," rasped the 'breed, "delivered in Coahuila."

"We'll sure deliver!" said Sam softly.

"Wal," threw back Cherokee, "you're the boss!"

CHAPTER NINE

FOR AWHILE Sam lay bellied in the squat brush beside the 'breed, scrutinizing the spread of steers peacefully grazing in the canyon below. There was enough beef there, he reflected, to stock a fair-sized ranch. The Three were rustling on a scale he never would have believed possible. This was just one haul. Turman had been syphoning stock out of the Basin for months. He was draining the country dry. The ranchers bankrupt, Mark would take over. Grudging respect began to mingle with the contempt he felt for his precise, dapper half-brother.

Then cold anger began to build as he considered the other's duplicity. Odds were that Mark engineered the theft of the twelve thousand gold that had driven him, Sam, from the Basin; he'd lured Mildred Walker into a loveless marriage; he'd bribed Secundo Snodgrass into legal fakery to grasp the Box B; now he was fastening his grip upon the entire Basin.

Cherokee's nudging elbow interrupted his cogitations. The 'breed began to work backward from the rim. He followed suit. Together, they slipped and slithered down the slope, back to their ponies in the draw.

Sam hunkered against the snag and jerked out the makin's. "Just how would you handle this deal?" he inquired casually.

The 'breed lifted his shoulders. "Ain't but one way. We got seven guns. They's two guards. We blast the hombres and clean out the canyon."

"Then we've got two, three days drive ahead of us," mused Sam.

"Three days! Two easy trailing, then we hit the desert, water at Mesquite Wells and push across a twenty-mile dry stretch to the border."

"Wal, we sure ain't cleaning out that canyon!" declared Sam decisively.

Cherokee stiffened. "Could be I didn't hear you aright," he countered, with manifest disbelief.

"You heard!" Sam touched a match to his smoke. "Chew on this!" He eyed the bewildered 'breed whimsically. "We'll have a thousand or more cow critters on our hands for three days. You know how slow a herd travels. Afore the first sundown, Turman and his boys will catch up, stinging like a swarm of hornets. Could we hold that herd against ten, fifteen, maybe twenty guns? Hell, a snowball in hell would stand a better chance."

Cherokee sank upon his heels and remained silent. Then his dark eyes focussed Sam. "Ef I recollect right, you claimed it would be as easy as sluttin' a gut."

Sam chuckled. "Not your way—my way."

"And what would your way be?" rasped the 'breed.

"Keep cases on the canyon. When Turman drives, dog the herd. At Mesquite Wells, take over. Time word reaches the Box, the beef's delivered—and we've collected."

Cherokee nodded with manifest relief. "Dogblastit, Sam," he confessed, "you had me worried. Sure, you figured it right."

When they rode back to the ravine, Sam dispatched a lookout to the rim, and arranged reliefs. Meanwhile, they lazed around camp, waiting. Sam figured they wouldn't have long to wait. According to Cherokee, Turman had gathered twice the usual number of cows for this drive and they must have already grazed the grass in the canyon down to its roots.

Mid-morning of the second day, the lookout cycloned back and reported that a dozen or more riders were hazing stock out of the hideaway. Sam and Cherokee hit leather. When they panted up the slope and flattened on the rim, the canyon was almost empty. Rising dust at the far end

shrouded bunched stock, from which a broad ribbon of plodding steers coiled up toward the cleft in the wall and vanished into shadow. Faint, the yelling of circling punchers, pushing the herd through, reached the intent watchers' ears.

When dawn was still a promise in the east, seven riders filed out of the ravine and headed south, Cherokee in the lead. At noon, a smudge, like a slow-rolling fogbank, stained the blue of the horizon ahead—the dust of a herd on the move. Pulling down to a walk, the pursuers drifted in its wake.

The Blackwater Hills faded into the haze of distance behind them. Westward, the Sierra Madres bulked blue through currents of quivering air, a massive chain of mountains rising to pinnacle and chimney rock, sweeping still higher to form mighty peaks, garlanded by fleecy clouds.

Ahead stretched an arid immensity, heaving into eroded ridges, blotched by gleaming alkali, patched with desert growth, and, plain through the crystal-clear air, billowing off the simmering plain, slowmoving dust fog that marked the passage of the herd.

Like ants crawling through the vastness, the seven riders moved steadily along the trail of the rustled stock. Bandana yanked up over mouths and noses, they rode through an ever-hovering nimbus of fine dust stirred by their ponies' hooves. It drifted into their slitted eyes, filled their ears, sifted through their shirts, irritating, stinging.

Cherokee pulled up to Sam, touched his arm and pointed. "Mesquite Wells!" he grated.

The sun was sinking beyond the peaks into a crimson ocean and a darkening veil began to cloak the harsh face of the desert, erasing mountains. The dust of the herd ahead and the jagged finger of rock that marked Mesquite Wells was absorbed by the night.

When the darkening canopy overhead was a smother of stars Sam drew rein. Men dismounted stiffly, watered their mounts from the crowns of their Stetsons, spilled what was left in flabby waterbags into a blackened coffee pot. "Gawd!" growled Cherokee, "I could spit cotton."

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Around them dwelt the deep silence of the empty spaces. A shooting star streaked across the placid heavens like a burning ember, and was consumed by space. There was little talk. With the Wells in sight, every man knew that powder was due to burn.

They ate a meager meal that Cherokee gloomily announced failed to take the wrinkles out of his belly. Sam kicked the fire apart and again they all swung into leather, moving out in single file.

The distant bellowing of uneasy steers, protesting a strange bedding ground, pulsated across the plain. Sam raised a hand to halt the cavalcade, gestured to Cherokee and drifted on.

The terrain began to break up. Cautiously easing their ponies between huge chunks of lava, spewed up in some past cataclysm, the two finally pulled close to the dark bulk of the rock pile that towered above the Wells.

A distant shout reached their ears. Sam reined up and dismounted. Both men shucked their spurs, secured their ponies and began to Injun ahead.

Ghosting from one scattered boulder to another, they worked closer to a fire that glowed dull red beside a series of rocky basins in which the dark surface of still water reflected the stars.

Two forms bulked beneath blankets near the fire. A third rider sat smoking a cigarette, reclining against his saddle.

"Turman!" volunteered Cherokee, in a hoarse whisper.

Pulling back, they moved out toward the rumble of the herd.

Two riders were slowly circling an uneasy mob of animals that shadowed the face of the desert like a cloud. Now and again horns clacked and there was a swirl in the blowing, bellowing mass.

"Five men!" commented Sam. "Turman sure never figured on trouble."

"The lobo never had trouble," rasped Cherokee. "What we waiting for?"

Sam smiled silently at the repressed eagerness in the

'breed's voice. "You tell me!" he threw back. "Let's go get the boys."

A rope sang softly and the loop dropped over the head and shoulders of a circling night guard. Before a startled yell left the sleepy rider's throat, the loop jerked tight, he was hauled violently out of the saddle and rough fingers fastened on his windpipe.

On the far side of the herd, his pard suffered a like fate, but he was a faster-thinking hombre and his warning shot sent the herd milling before a steel barrel clouted him quiet.

Sam and the four remaining riders were stealthily creeping up to the men around the campfire when the report of a shot hit their ears.

Turman yelled an alarm, flung himself sideways and rolled out of the flickering circle of light. Lanes of fire licked out of the darkness. A rider rose unsteadily from his blankets, spun around and dropped as a slug slammed into him. The other came up on one knee, triggering. Turman's sixgun was stabbing .45 flame.

The mingling roar of gunfire reverberated against the rock pile looming over the combatants and rumbled away across the desert. Whining lead cut down the kneeling rider, a plain mark in the firelight.

Spitting curses, Turman thrust fresh loads through the loading gate of his gun.

Questing forward, the attackers loomed in the flickering light, guns ready and eyes searching. Bellied in the shadow of heaped firewood, Turman again went into action, his gun spitting red death.

Hardwinter, a puncher on Sam's left, shrieked and staggered, blood spouting from his throat. Again the gloom was stabbed crimson, as men flung themselves flat and opened up on the red-winking gun that was Turman's.

Sam, circling, focussed his old opponent's outstretched form, threw down and thumbed the hammer. He heard Turman's agonized yelp. Moving ahead, crouching, he saw the foreman drop his gun and clutch a leg.

"Reach!" he yelled, rushing forward. Hand dripping

scarlet, Turman grabbed for his gun. Sam was atop of him before he could raise it. Sam's leg swung and his sharp-toed riding boot hammered into Turman's wrist. The six-gun flew through the air. Turman, snarling, strove to rise. Others were crowding around now. Cherokee's gun swung in a short arc and the steel barrel took the foreman above an ear. Stunned, he dropped back and lay unmoving.

"Fix his leg and truss him up," snapped Sam, swinging around to give attention to a rider who emerged into the circle of light. He was herding two sullen prisoners, hands lashed behind them. "Baldy's circling the herd," he reported, "and he needs a hand. Them steers are almighty spooky."

Someone threw more brush on the fire. Sam sent another man out to the herd and then stood taking stock. The fracas had been brief but deadly. The leaping flames of the camp-fire revealed three men lying stiff, limbs contorted by death. Turman's rawboned form was stretched out, wrists lashed behind him. His right pant leg had been slit and a bandana, rusty-red, was wrapped around the damaged leg. Lying on his back, he followed every movement around with smoldering eyes. The two other prisoners stood nearby in moody silence.

Cherokee came up in high good humor. He jerked his head in the direction of the two captured night guards. "You crave we should plug them hombres?" he rasped. "Ain't no trees around for hanging."

"Give them a choice," directed Sam. "Lend a hand with the herd or take a bullet."

Then Cherokee's dark eyes dwelt on the glowering foreman, "Turman's in no shape to lend a hand!"

"Plug me and be damned!" snarled the prisoner. "And don't figure you coyotes will get away with this. The Three u'll stretch the neck of every last man."

The 'breed fondled his gun butt. "He ain't no use, Sam!"

"There's been plenty killing," said Sam sharply. "I'll handle Turman."

With dawn, they piled a cairn of rock over the three dead men. Flanked by yelling, yipeeing riders, the herd flowed

like a turgid stream southward toward the Border. Set on his skewbald pony, the disabled Turman was headed back north, weaponless, mouthing sulphurous threats of vengeance. Cherokee didn't like it, but Sam was adamant. "Maybe it's poor judgement," he agreed, "but I draw the line at murder."

As the two jogged along in the dust of the herd, Cherokee feasted his eyes on the long-horned, shaggy-coated column, moving like a giant, multi-coated centipede across the desert; happily contemplating the fact that each was a ten-dollar gold piece on the hoof. "I guess," he said, "we hit The Three where it hurt."

"Hell," smiled Sam, "they're due to be hit plenty—yet."

CHAPTER TEN

FITFUL LIGHT played on the bronzed faces of six men, hunkered around a campfire. Sam and his sidekicks were back in the ravine, their former hideaway in the Blackwater Hills. And, as Cherokee phrased it, "They were happier than lost souls with hell in a flood."

Two saddlebags lay beside Sam and from them he lifted out neat packages of greenbacks. Every eye followed his movements as he carefully sorted the currency into six piles.

"Wal," he drawled, "you gents know the score. 1264 cows, ten dollars apiece, which tallies \$12,640. The odd forty I passed to Turman's two boys for eating money. Divided even, as agreed, we pocket \$2100 apiece."

"That sure ain't hard to take," grunted Cherokee.

"You boys earned it," said Sam, and began tossing packages of bills to the men around the fire.

"Sam," rasped the breed, "you got another job in mind? I guarantee five guns to back your play."

"Maybe," returned the rider thoughtfully.

Five pairs of eyes focussed him with eager expectation.

Sam disposed of the final pack of greenbacks and made a cigarette. "I figure The Three are through," he resumed.

Steve Roberts, a thin-featured individual, rawhide tough, laughed harshly. But Sam continued, even-voiced, "Sure they're going up, up, up. Wal, they've reached the top and from now on it'll be down, down, down." His glance flicked around the circle and read doubt in guarded eyes.

"Sure they've got the Basin hogswiggled," he agreed. "Why?" Because the ranchers haven't wised up." In no

haste, he straightened, sauntered to a pile of dry brush set ready for burning, and broke off half a dozen straight sticks. The sticks in one hand, he dropped down again by the fire. Curious eyes followed every move as he took one stick, held it with both hands and snapped it. "One ranch!" he commented laconically, "And it sure busts easy."

Then he picked up the remaining five sticks, held them in a tight bundle, a fist latched onto each end. The muscles in his forearms bulged as he strove to break the bundle—in vain. Carelessly, he tossed the sticks into the fire. "Get the idea?" he inquired. There was puzzled silence.

"One by one," he explained, "The Three can break every rancher in the Basin. Once the ranchers get together as one, fight as one, The Thrêe will be through."

"Who'll get 'em together?" inquired Sad Selborne, a bull of a man whose wrinkled, heavy-jowled features bore a remarkable resemblance to a bloodhound's.

"I will!" snapped Sam. "And when The Three's busted, every hombre of their payroll will be a renegade, hunting a spot to hide."

Cherokee spat into the fire, "Just where does that leave us?"

"On the winning side," said Sam. "I pay \$100 a month to every man who sides me, plus a \$500 bonus and a riding job when I take over the Box."

"We'll trip over our beards afore then," growled Roberts.

"I've got a thousand smackers," retorted Sam blandly, "that say The Three are out of business before snow settles on the Santa Marias—that ain't six months ahead." He looked around, "Who'll cover it?"

Men stirred uneasily but said nothing.

Cherokee broke the silence, "Count me in!" he rasped.

Again Sam's glance brushed around the circle of brooding faces. "Chew on it!" he invited. "Any gent who feels the urge to saddle up and pull out at sun-up is welcome. There'll be no hard feelings."

When Cherokee set the coffee pot on and mixed a mess of flapjack flour the next morning every man was present.

The sun had scarce cleared distant mountains when the contingent headed for the Window Sash, one of the five ranches located north of West Fork, that bisected the Basin midway. Of these, Turman rodded the Lazy E, on the fringe of the Blackwater Hills. Tom Walker, Mildred Benson's father, owned the Turtle, the most southerly. Sam figured that the bull-necked Walker, ornery as a steer, would stick by his son-in-law, Mark. That left three, Gus Heger's Window Sash, Bill Manton's Frying Pan, and the SCC, a big company outfit at the headwaters of Medicine Creek, of which one Leighton Langstrom was manager. There had been cows from all three ranches, their brands hastily worked over, in the herd they'd delivered across the Border.

The Window Sash was a boar's nest. There were no two guesses about that, reflected Sam, as the six riders neared Heger's spread. There was no ranchhouse, just one long, rock-and-adobe bunkhouse, against one end of which a grub shack leaned. A clapboard barn, a scattering of sheds and a corral completed the set-up, over which a metal windmill, slow-spinning, rose on spidery legs.

Along one side of the bunkhouse ran a rude gallery, crowded with a disorder of discarded saddlery. Several ancient rockers were set around, from one of which Gus Heger squinted suspiciously at the newcomers as they jingled into the yard. Heger was a short, blocky man, with lined, desert-eroded features, clad in the plaid shirt, loose-hanging vest and denims of the range. A faded red bandana was knotted around his throat and thinning hair showed beneath a sweat-stained old Stetson. A perpetual frown of worryment creased his brow.

While Cherokee and the others watered their ponies, Sam hit for the gallery. He knew Gus Heger as a somewhat irascible cowman who had, in times past, locked horns with Bull. This, he thought, was not going to be easy.

"Howdy Gus!" he greeted. "Member me?"

"Could I forget," growled Heger, "you're the spitting image of Bull. Step out of the sun and rest your legs."

Sam mounted the gallery steps, shoved a mess of saddlery

off the seat of a rocker and dropped down beside the cowman.

The cook, in dirty white singlet and dungarees, banged open the grubshack door and threw a bucket of water into the yard. Several scraggy hens darted out of shade and began scratching vigorously.

"Sure is peaceful around here," commented Sam.

Heger snorted. "Like hell it's peaceful! The Big Three kicked my pants up around my neck so tight I'm most choking to death."

"You must be funning," rejoined Sam, sympathetically.

"Funnin'!" roared the rancher. "They take pot shots at my boys, they run off my cows, they tromp my britches."

"And you squat here content as a puppy on a warm brick," murmured Sam. "Hell, Gus, you hobbled?"

"Hobbled!" yelled the cowman, "I'm hogtied. The Three muster thirty-forty gunhands. I got six saddle-pounders and two lying in the bunkhouse behind us, crippled by slugs."

"So they whittle you down!" Sam relaxed in the rocker savoring a smoke. "Remember Jack Eisner? Turman looted his Lazy E 'til Jack was stony-broke, then took over the ranch as a favor." Sam was using his imagination, but he guessed it was close to the truth. "You're headed thataway, Gus."

"And ain't a doggoned thing I can do about it," bemoaned the rancher.

"That's just where you're wrong, dead wrong."

"Quit dribbling!" growled Heger.

"Listen!" Sam's voice suddenly brittle. "Turman fronts for The Three. His play is plain. He takes you ranchers one by one—and busts you. You get together, you bust him."

"That's loco talk!" The rancher's glum glance roamed over the sun-drenched flats. "Tom Walker of the Turtle sides The Three. That leaves Bill Manton's outfit, he got eight on his payroll, which gives us fourteen gunhands." He shrugged hopelessly.

"You forgot I brought five. With my gun that tallies twenty."

"Can I hire five guns, when I'm near busted," snapped the rancher.

"Who said our guns would cost you anything?"

Heger eyed his visitor with frowning disbelief. "Then just what do you get out of this?"

"I get my finangling, double-crossing half-brother," returned Sam curtly. "And you overlooked the Southern Cattle Company. They must have twenty or more on their payroll."

"Some ruddy Linejuicer rods the SCC," growled the cowman. "The bustard works with no-one."

"Couldbe we'll convince the gent," rejoined Sam cheerfully. "If he balks, our twenty gunhands can cut quite a swathe."

Heger said nothing. Gloomily, he built a smoke.

Sam broke a long silence. "Gus, you're bogged down and sinking fast. Either you start kicking or give up the ghost. Whatsay we both ride over and brave Manton, then drop in on the SCC—or are you too doggoned feeble to lift out of that rocker?"

Heger's rocker lurched violently as he jumped to his feet. "Let's ride!" he grated. "Sure, I'll fight. That way I'll bleed to death anyway. Have your boys drop their rolls in the bunk-house."

It was near sundown when the two reached The Frying Pan, sixteen miles north, where the flat floor of the Basin wrinkled into foothills.

Bill Manton, the Frying Pan boss, a laconic, whiskered oldtimer, heard Sam's story in poker-faced silence. When he was through, the cowman eyed Heger, "You taking a hand, Gus?"

Heger nodded glumly. "It's that or quit and I been raising cows too long to quit."

Manton transferred his attention to Sam. "The Three been pestering like gadflies," he said, "reckon I'm in."

"Hunky-dory!" smiled the rider. Two down and one to go, he thought. "Let's acquaint the SCC with our intentions," he suggested.

BATTLING BUCKEROOS

Neat, shining, orderly, the SCC home ranch made Heger's and Manton's outfits look like dumps, considered Sam, as the three came in sight of the Southern Cattle Company's buildings. Bunkhouse, barns, wagon shed, all were white-washed snowy white. A bunch of ponies drifted around a white-railed pasture, and, against a background of fluffing cottonwood, a neat, white-painted bungalow, flowers blooming in profusion around it, made one of the prettiest pictures he had ever seen.

When the three tied their ponies outside and jingled up upon the gallery, a buxom woman, in crisp house dress, with the fresh features of one raised in a gentler clime, opened the door.

Sam introduced himself and his companions and inquired the whereabouts of Langstrom, the manager.

"I'm Mrs. Langstrom," smiled the woman. She indicated easy chairs on the gallery. "I'll call Leighton, he's working in the office."

Leighton Langstrom, manager for the British company that owned the SCC, proved to be a precise, straight-backed man in his forties, with cold gray eyes and a crisp bristly mustache. His blue shirt was tailored to square-set shoulders, his whipcord breeches fitted like a glove and his gleaming riding boots were speckless. An ex-cavalry officer, guessed Sam.

Langstrom greeted his visitors with stiff politeness.

Close upon his heels, his wife bustled out carrying a tray upon which stood four tall glasses of a pale liquid and a generous plate of homemade cookies.

"Just a sip of lemonade," she beamed, "you must be thirsty," set the tray on a side table and retired.

Langstrom handed the glasses around and his visitors held them gingerly in rope-scarred hands, the contents untasted. Sam could have gambled that Heger and Manton hadn't sampled a soft drink in a decade. He munched a cooky and decided that Mrs. Langstrom was a grade one cook, then, tentatively, he sipped his lemonade. For a moment, he

savored the anemic looking liquid, unbelieving, then a happy smile creased his features and he drank avidly. The drink was liberally, very liberally, spiked with gin. The manager's wife, he decided, was a very understanding person.

Langstrom stuffed the bowl of a brier pipe and listened in chilled silence as Sam spread his hand.

When the rider was through, the SCC manager puffed his pipe without speaking for several minutes, then shook his head decisively.

"Gentlemen," he rapped out, in a brisk, incisive tone, "you have my sympathy. But my job is to raise cattle, not waste men and material in petty feuding. I regard this as purely an inter-ranch affair."

"You're losing cows!" interjected Sam.

The manager shrugged. "There is always some rustling in cattle country and naturally we are not exempt. Our losses, however, have been quite nominal."

"You're due to lose more," drawled Sam. "The Three already busted the Lazy E. Right now they're looting the Sash and Frying Pan. Then your turn will come, just as sure as the sun sets."

Langstrom smiled tightly. "We'll take care of trouble if and when it develops. Until then, gentlemen, please regard the SCC as strictly neutral." And no further argument of Sam's could budge him.

When the three rode away, Heger burst out with disgust, "The stiff-necked slob! I could have booted his arse."

"He's a Britisher and he plays 'em close to his vest," returned Sam confidently. "He'll see different! That gent's like his lemonade—it looks wishy-washy but it sure packs a kick."

"A kick!" snorted Manton. "That slop?"

"So you left yours setting on the gallery," grinned Sam. "Me, I swallowed mine—I gamble it was 80% alcohol."

"Holy rattlesnake's puppies!" moaned the stricken Manton.

"Wal," put in Heger disconsolately, "we lost our right power."

"And it sure strips our hand," agreed Manton.

BATTLING BUCKEROOS

If he didn't move fast, thought Sam, his newly improvised organization would fall apart before it had a chance to function. "Like hell it does!" he threw back forcefully. "Now chew on this ideal"

CHAPTER ELEVEN

SHADOWS WERE thickening on the flats when Sam and Heger rode into the Sash. Pricking through the gloom like red sparks, the glowing tips of cigarettes marked punchers hunkered around the yard and perched on the top rail of the corral. Saddlesore, the two riders stripped off their ponies' gear.

Heger had boarded off one end of the bunkhouse to make a separate room, which served as his office and living quarters. Picking a path through the litter on the gallery, Sam followed him inside.

The rancher reached down a stable lamp suspended from one of the heavy vegas that supported the roof, touched a match to the wick and set it back. By the soft yellow light, Sam took stock of his surroundings. A battered brass bed was set against the clapboard partition, a straightback chair beside it. Near by, a fly-specked calendar hung above a decrepit bureau. A square table, laden with tally books, catalogues, old newspapers, had been pushed against a side wall. Oddments of clothing dangled from pegs, a spooled roll was tossed in one corner. That, with two wooden rockers in the center of the beaten earth floor, completed the furnishings.

"Wal," commented the rancher, "guess one of the boys brought mail from town." He stepped up to the table and picked up several letters and a newspaper, "The Sweetgrass Sentinel." A low whistle escaped him as he casually glanced at the front page of the newspaper. Without comment, he handed it to Sam. A two-column headline announced:

ACCUSED MURDERER TURNS RUSTLER

Features unmoved, Sam read on:

"Sam Benson, wanted for the killing of Fatso, bartender of the Lone Star Saloon, has been skulking around the Blackwater Hills, as is attested by a warrant, sworn out by Mark Benson, of the Box B.

Mark alleges that his fugitive half-brother, leading a gang of renegades, staged a surprise attack on Tod Turman, former Box foreman who now rods The Lazy E, and four Box punchers, moving a Box herd.

In the fracas, Turman stopped a bullet in his right leg, but is now in the saddle again. Two Box waddies were killed.

Turman states that the herd was turned south and his two surviving punchers forced to assist the rustlers in their drive. The stolen beef was probably sold over the border.

Sam, it will be remembered, has a bad reputation. He bolted out of the Basin five years back, following the disappearance of \$12,000 entrusted to him by his father, Bull Benson, to pay off a cattle buyer. He recently reappeared, leaving, it is claimed, a trail of violence behind him along the border.

Mark Benson has posted a reward of \$1,000—dead or alive for apprehension of his renegade half-brother."

"Hogwash!" commented Sam, handing the newspaper

back. "The Three run this sheet and I guess they call the tune."

"You better watch your back trail," cautioned Heger. "Some bounty hunter's liable to make you wormfeed. A thousand cartwheels aren't hard to take."

Under the stars Sam and Cherokee jogged away from the ranch, heading for the Blackwater Hills. Through the night they traversed the Hills, threading through a tangle of canyons. Cherokee, leading, could have followed the trail blindfolded.

Dawn found them bellied on a high bench, overlooking the Basin. Bone-weary, Sam lay lax, watching pale fingers of light reach across the sky, slowly erasing the stars. The sun rimmed distant mountains and painted the barren slopes around them with gold. The Basin was still a vast bowl of shadow, which gradually evaporated as the sun rose, revealing a criss-cross of ridges below them, veined by dark-shrouded ravines, smoothing into waves of bald hills that rolled down to the flats.

Cherokee tapped Sam's shoulder and pointed. Slowly taking shape as the light strengthened were the buildings of a ranch, set in a fold of the hills, tiny in the distance.

Sam focussed a spyglass. In the lens, weathered-grayed house, bunkhouse, barn were plain, even a thread of smoke wavering up from a stovepipe chimney. But what took his attention was a dark, undulating smudge against the sweep of a draw, south of the ranch. A herd! Two riders were slow circling.

Sam chuckled and handed the spyglass to the 'breed. "Wal, we guessed right," he commented. "Turman's gathering this herd right on his doorstep. He figures a hideaway back in the hills is too risky, now we're on the loose. Figure we can cut 'em out?"

"Ain't nothing says we can't try," rasped Cherokee.

That evening, Sam slacked in a rocker in Heger's quarters, discussing the proposed raid. The rancher paced

restlessly. Abruptly, he fired a question, "You dead sure Turman don't carry no more'n a dozen hands at the Lazy E?"

"Nothing's sure, outside of death and taxes," admitted Sam, "but plain horse sense tells me that if the Box carries, say forty hands on its payroll, Mark sure ain't bunching 'em at Turman's spread. Mark figures everything, including the chance I might hit the Box. He'll hold a crew at home, just in case."

"We're sure taking a big chance," demurred the rancher. "You figure wrong, Turman will wipe me out and I spent my life building this spread."

"Since when did you quit taking chances?" demanded Sam, his tone hardening. "Don't tell me you got cold feet, Gus."

"It ain't that!" protested the other. "I just got to thinking."

"Nope," smiled Sam, with wry humor, "It's just that The Three got the Indian sign on you. Now quit bellyaching!" He wondered if he'd ever hold Heger in line. The cowman was wavering, scared of angering The Three. Only realization that he faced ruin if the wholesale rustling wasn't checked had prodded him into action. If he pulled out, Mantton would follow.

His only chance of tying these men in with him was to prove, beyond doubt, that Turman was draining away their life blood—stock. Staid, working ranchers, older men whose life had been devoted to raising cattle, they had no liking for gunsmoke. If, as he suspected, the herd Turman was gathering consisted mainly of Sash and Frying Pan beef, and he could convince them of the fact, they would stick. If he failed to cut that herd out, they'd quit.

A segment of moon showed wan behind fleecy clouds and peopled the plain with shadows when Sam and his five riders swept over the swales like shadows. They rode in silence and there was no sound save the creak of saddle leather and the muted jingle of bit chains.

For an hour, two hours, they headed west. Then the flats began to swell higher and higher, like gathering waves of an earthy ocean. Heat-hardened and wind-scoured, the terrain

heaved up, split into ravines and dry washes. Cherokee took the lead and the riders strung out in single file.

Midnight was behind them when the 'breed drew rein on the edge of a bench. Faint-shadowed in the sweep of a saucerlike draw below was the dark irregular shape of a herd. Sound of its bawling and blowing was plain, pulsating through the quiet night. Pricking through the darkness, perhaps a mile distant, were the lighted windows of a ranch.

"Now listen!" said Sam, and the riders bunched around him. "If we tangle our spurs, Turman's boys will make hash of us. Handle this right and it's as easy as eating striped candy. Forget the guards! Drift down easy and spread out." He indicated the terrain below with a sweep of the arm. "When I loose a shot, stampede the critters. They're uneasy, on strange ground. They'll bolt like scalded cats out of hell. Haze 'em for that notch." He pointed at a break in the hills to the east. Cherokee, Steve, Tex and me will pile out of leather at the notch and hold Turman's bunch. You, Sad and Cheyenne, push 'em hard for the Sash. We'll be tailing you. Wal, let's go!"

With no suspicion that danger threatened, the two night guards circled the herd, half-dozing and crooning from habit to quiet the cattle. The sound of a shot punched through the night, followed by a ragged fusilade as six yelling demons, flapping slickers, charged down on the dark mass of beef. In a flash the herd broke, horns clashing, and hurtled off the bedding ground, the heat-hardened ground quivering beneath the impact of their thundering hooves. One guard, sleepily walking his pony, lay in their path. Before the startled puncher realized his peril, the crazed mob of snorting, wild-eyed steers were at and over him. In seconds, horse and rider were pulverized into mash by sharp, churning hooves.

The remaining guard, guns flashing around him, clapped spurs to his pony and streaked for the ranch.

A tossing sea of horns, the stampeded herd streamed for the break in the hills, riders, yelling apparitions in the thickening dust haze, pressing their flanks and hazing them to greater panic.

A dark, turgid stream, they flowed through the break and wound between sloping hillsides. At the break, a notch in the hills perhaps a hundred yards wide, four of the madly-racing riders yanked their ponies to a halt. Three swung out of leather and slid Winchesters from saddle sheaths. One remained in the saddle, gathered the trailing reins of the three riderless ponies and led the hard-breathing animals toward the projecting shoulder of a hill. The dismounted men flattened themselves among scattered rock.

Bellied down beside Cherokee, Sam smeared dust off his sweaty features and peered into the gloom of the night. "I gamble Turman's as mad as a drunk squaw," he drawled.

"We ain't out of the bog yet," growled the 'breed. He pressed an ear against the ground, listening intently. "They're acoming!"

The reverberations of the racing herd had died and Sam was conscious of new, faint tremors. As he waited, rifle cradled to shoulder, the drumming of hooves became plain. Dim in the starlight, he focussed a block of riders pounding up toward them. In the vague light, it was hard to estimate numbers, but he figured there were no more than a dozen, maybe less.

Almost as one, three rifles spat fire. Then, unceasing, the prone marksmen poured hot lead into the bunched riders, empties tinkling down beside them.

The band of horsemen slowed, hesitated, broke, scattering in confusion as riders whirled, collided, strove to control wildly plunging mounts. A gunflash or two illumined the night as random shots answered the lash of gunfire, then—in seconds—the Lazy E bunch had vanished. Silence again enveloped the notch, except for the fast-dying tattoo of ponies' hooves and the moaning of a wounded man lying somewhere out in the shadowed obscurity.

Sam came to his feet, eyes searching. Three bodies were blobbed on the rocky ground in their front and the barrels of two dead ponies bulked large. He released a shrill whistle and the horse-holder came up at a gallop. The three piled into leather and hit the wake of the herd.

"I reckon," commented Sam, "The Three feel a mite discouraged."

"And I reckon," threw back Cherokee, "they'll be on our trail pronto, with blood in their eyes."

"Not before daylight," said Sam.

The herd was out on the flats when they caught up with it, the steers lumbering along at a slow trot, blown, many with horns broken or knocked off. The pace didn't bother Sam. He had no fear of further pursuit before sun-up. Turman's riders would buck at rushing the notch again in the dark.

He pulled over to Cherokee as they jogged along in the dust of the drag. "Hit for the Frying Pan," he directed. "Manton's due to give us a hand, with his crew. He knows the score, but I don't crave a slip-up."

Daylight was close when they threw the mob of exhausted cows into the wire-fenced horse pasture of the Sash. Then five trail-stained riders headed for the cookshack and swilled hot coffee, while curious Sash hands crowded around, firing questions.

"I guessed right," Sam told the rancher. "Turman's crew numbered less than a dozen, and we tagged four. Maybe he'll round up another half-dozen and he'll sure be here, spitting and snorting, afore noon—that herd left a trail a blind mule could follow."

CHAPTER TWELVE

INSPECTION of the herd banished all doubt as to the nature of Tod Turman's operations. Threading through hock-town, dust-smothered steers, Sam and Heger failed to spot a single Lazy E brand among the five hundred or more head. A smattering carried the neat SCC stamp brand. There were even a few from the Turtle, but the bulk were marked with the square Window Sash and the Frying Pan tadpole.

Anger grew in Heger's worried eyes and he sighted more and more Sash steers. "I've strung jaspers up for less than this," growled the grizzled rancher. "That Turman hombre is bleeding me white."

A yell from the top of the windmill, where an active young Sash waddy had perched to act as lookout, brought the two back to the ranch at a canter. The lookout was pointing westward across the plain. Against the blue of the sky, dust plumes were smoking, and moving fast. Soon riders came into view, no more than dark specks, bobbing in and out of sight as they breasted the swales.

Heger had made the situation plain to his hands. The saddle stock drummed off, the cavvyman running them to a place of safety.

In the bunkhouse, preparations had already been made for a siege. Bunks had been dismantled to clear the floor. Bedding and warbags were piled in a corner. Two punchers were still busy with picks, hacking holes in the thick adobe walls to serve as gunports. A barrel of water stood upended. Most of the movable contents of the cookshack were dumped

in Heger's quarters, entry to which had been punched in the clapboard partition. The cook already had a huge coffee pot perking on the bunkhouse pot-bellied stove. Men cleaned guns with cheerful anticipation.

Behind these bullet-proof walls, reflected Sam with satisfaction, the fourteen guns they mustered could hold the bunkhouse 'til doomsday, or at least until ammunition ran short. Before sundown, Manton and his boys should arrive and hit Turman's bunch in the rear. Jammed between the Frying Pan crew and the Sash, the Lazy E riders wouldn't have a show.

Through one of the small, square windows, he watched Turman's crew approach and bunch out of rifleshoot. The count, he figured, was sixteen at the most. Then four riders split off, heading for the pasture, while the remainder scattered. In minutes, not a man was in his field of vision.

He made his way to Heger's quarters. The cook was busy sorting out his stock. Sam stepped over sacks of potatoes, boxes of airtights, mingled pots and pans. The rancher stood by an end window, looking out. Sam came up and looked over his shoulder.

The pasture fence had been cut and yipeeing punchers were pushing the much-travelled herd out. The steers emerged in long procession—brindles, yellows, red roan, black spotted, solid blacks—and, like a broad, multi-colored ribbon, wound away across the plain.

"There goes our evidencel" said Sam.

Heger's growl was almost a groan.

"Perk up!" advised Sam. "We ain't seen the last of them, not the way I've got it figured."

"If you figure wrong. I reckon I'm out close on two hundred head."

The faint spang of a rifleshoot hit their ears, then a shrill yelp from the bunkhouse brought them hurriedly to the gap in the partition. Ruefully grabbing the upper part of his right arm, a Sash hand had staggered back from a window. Blood soaked his shirt sleeve and ran red between his fingers. Guns had opened up now on every side, pouring in leaden hail.

The stove pipe, protruding above the roof, clanged and quivered.

"Keep clear of the windows!" yelled Sam and hastened toward the stricken man. A bullet had drilled his arm. Someone found a clean white shirt in a warbag. Sam tore it into strips and bandaged the wound. Then he moved from window to window, endeavoring to gauge their assailants' intentions. On one side, the bulk of the barn blocked the view. Nothing was visible from the others, outside of knots of riderless saddle horses far out on the scorched plain, and, here and there, a faint haze of blue powdersmoke, marking the spot where a marksman was bedded down. "They're holding us," he told Heger, "while Turman gets word to Mark. Wal, Manton should be along most any time."

Through the long, heat-weary afternoon intermittent fire kept up. Near sundown, another defender was put out of action, a whining ricochet burying itself beneath his ribs. Sam sensed that the men in the bunkhouse were becoming restive, chafing under forced inaction and weary of loosing impotent lead at unseen opponents. Where in the name of creation, he wondered, was Manton and his Frying Pan boys.

With nightfall, firing died down. The men in the bunkhouse fumbled around in the darkness. A light would have spelt sudden death, outlining clear cut targets for marksmen creeping close in the darkness.

Sam stood at a window, staring out at a vague stretch of plain, apparently deserted, faint-lit by the stars. Behind him, he could hear vague movements of men fumbling around, stumbling over obstacles, colliding and cursing. For no good reason, uneasiness gripped him. Turman was not the type to sit down and wait patiently, not when there was a chance of action. But what could Turman do, he reasoned—the defenders of the Sash were as cozy as bugs in a rug. The massive bunkhouse was practically impregnable. Turman could do nothing but grind his teeth, and wait it out.

Negation came fast—a vivid, blue-white lightning flash, an ear-splitting detonation and a shock that threw him violently against the rough wall. The entire building rocked as

though in the clutch of an earthquake. His brain momentarily numbed by the shock, Sam heard the stovepipe clatter down, the clunk of heavy fragments raining on the roof, then panic gripped the darkened bunkhouse—men struggling, choking, yelling. The air became fogged as smoke from the stove poured into the room and mingled with the acrid taint of powdersmoke. Outside, too, all hell seemed to have broken loose. Darting patterns of gunflame etched the night and lead droned into the confused tangle of men. Staring toward Heger's quarters, at the far end, and fending off blundering bodies, Sam focussed patches of star-sprinkled sky, framed by ragged fragments of wall. Lower, flame stabbed from guns, pouring lead into the crazed confusion around him.

Pushing and punching, he fought his way down the bunkhouse, stumbled over the remnants of the collapsed partition and stared into space.

Then the extent of the calamity became plain. Turman had planted a powder charge under the end of the building and blown it skyhigh. Wide open, they were being raked by the attackers' fire.

He swung back into the bunkhouse, yelling, "Get down! Down, down, down!" After awhile, a semblance of order was restored. Men quieted, except for the wounded, groaning in the darkness. Crawling around, he set men building a barricade where the partition had stood. It was slow, clumsy work, in bullet-whipped obscurity. Bedrolls, bedboards, sacks of flour, benches, anything that would stop lead, went into the makeshift wall. Behind it, he posted men who had been able to get their hands on rifles. As lances of flame began to bit back from the defenders, fire from the night slackened. But, until darkness fled, Sam knew there was little he could do to restore order, tend to the wounded and check on the damage. He found Heger. "Say," he told the rancher, "Turman's using explosives. He's liable to blow the whole shebang to hell. I'm going out and scout around."

"Where's Bill Manton?" demanded the cowman plaintively.

He seemed confused and bewildered. But Sam had crawled away.

Moving up to the men crouched along the makeshift barricade, he told them of his intent, wriggled over the barrier and wormed through a mess of scattered airtights, spilled food-stuffs and heaped rubble.

Emerging into the open, he wormed around to the outside wall and lay stretched out against its base. From the direction of the pasture, crimson flashes marked Turman guns, throwing lead through the open end of the bunkhouse. Apart from that, there was no sign of action on the darkened plain. Couldbe, he reflected, Turman was creating a diversion while he planted another charge at the further end of the building. That would be the finish for defenders of the Sash.

Foot by foot, he eased along the wall, reached the angle of the building and peered around it. Eyes not adjusted to the starlight, he focussed the forms of two men, lying prone. One was digging against the foundation with a broad-bladed knife; the other held two cylindrical objects. Sam didn't need to guess what they were. "Giant cartridges!" he muttered.

He drew his sixgun, thumbed the hammer and levelled with cold deliberation. The first shot took the man with the cartridges in the chest. He dropped the cartridges and rolled, over and over, squealing like a stuck pig. At the sound of the report, the other jumped to his feet and bolted like a startled deer. Sam's second slug took him between the shoulder blades. He somersaulted and lay still—very still.

Sam came to his feet, raced along the end of the bunkhouse, grabbed the two red cylinders spilled on the ground and darted back. Again on hands and knees, he moved swiftly along the base of the rock-and-adobe wall. Where it ended in crumbling ruin, he yelled to the men sprawled behind the barricade inside and, stumbling over debris, gained its shelter and flopped down, gasping for breath.

Heger's voice came through the gloom, "You back, Sam?" "Yep!" returned the rider tightly. He fingered the cart-

ridges of Giant powder, "And I guess they'll quit blasting."

When the pallid dawn grayed the swales and filtered into the beleagured bunkhouse, Sam was taken aback at sight of the chaos around him. The barricade was a motley of heaped junk. Beyond it, the entire end of the building had vanished, the side walls, jagged abutments of cracked and split masonry, protruding grotesquely.

Smashed furniture, kitchen utensils, dented airtights, spilt flour jumbled Heger's quarters. From beneath the splintered remnants of the bureau the cook's mangled legs protruded. He had died in the explosion.

Men lay or hunkered around the bunkhouse, some with rudely bandaged wounds, all dishevelled, eyes bloodshot, features smeared with soot. Sam had never seen a more weary, discouraged bunch of riders. The stove still stood intact, but lengths of black, sooty pipe were scattered around. Chips of adobe and empty cartridge cases lay in murky puddles that pooled on the earth floor. The bodies of two dead men bulked in a corner, covered with a tarp.

Heger hunkered wearily against a wall, unshaven, eyes weary. "We'll never make it, Sam," he announced tiredly. "Bill Manton tangled his spurs."

"Heck, we ain't dead yet!" threw back the rider. His glance swept over the somber, silent defenders. "Wal," he commented cheerfully, "you gents look sadder than a bunch of tick-fevered doggies. Rattle your hocks and let's make this dicehouse a fit place to live in. You Steve, fit that stove-pipe together and start a fire. I could sure swallow a mug of dip." Then he focussed the water barrel. It lay on its side, empty, staves smashed.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

So THEY were without water! Sam mentally cursed himself for calling attention to the fact. Aloud, he announced wryly, "Wal, suddenly I ain't thirsty!"

As he anticipated, the men forgot their troubles when they had something to occupy their minds. Everyone got busy. The barricade was rebuilt more solidly, the wounded were made comfortable on spread bedrolls, the mess over the bunkhouse floor cleaned up. If there was no water, there were plenty cans of tomato juice. An occasional slug, zipping over the barricade, was the only reminder that danger lurked outside.

But as the spirits of the men rose, Sam's dropped. His plan to trap Turman had apparently misfired. The idea had been for Manton and his Frying Pan crew to hit the attackers in the rear, sandwich them between two fires and cut them up. But where was Manton? Seemed he had changed his mind about bucking The Three.

Then Sam had never figured on the use of blasting powder. He had deemed the rock-and-adobe bunkhouse impregnable against rifle fire—now Turman had blown it wide open.

Heger drifted up as he stood gazing morosely out over the sun-drenched plain. "It ain't like Bill Manton to show color," commented the cowman. Sam shrugged. He'd sent Cherokee to make sure that there would be no slip-up, but it seemed that the Frying Pan just hadn't delivered.

Heger indicated the smashed remnants of what had been his quarters, "Another blast like that and we'll sprout wings."

The rancher was right, reflected Sam soberly. With Tur-

man using Giant powder, odds were the Sash wouldn't survive another night. And his efforts to checkmate The Three and regain the Box would collapse with the Sash. Likely the victors would hang him—pronto.

It was nearing noon. The sun beat down with mounting, fierce intensity. Afar off, the Blackwater Hills simmered, bleak and brownish-yellow. Men lay or hunkered listlessly around the cluttered bunkhouse. Not even a rifleshoot disturbed the heat-soaked quiet.

A distant splutter, as though someone had set off a string of firecrackers, tautened Sam. He hurried to a window, listening, as the far-off popping continued, drawing perceptibly closer.

"Manton!" he exclaimed and a weight seemed suddenly to lift from his shoulders. The air of lassitude dropped off the other defenders, quickly, they crowded the few small windows, eagerly gazing out.

Theirs were not the only ears to catch the sound of approaching gunfire. Out on the flats men were popping out of holes like jackrabbits and easing back toward their ponies. Afar off, smoking dust marked a fast-moving rider.

Peering through the spyglass, Sam saw another horseman advance to meet him. It was Tod Turman on his skewbald pony. They conferred briefly, then Turman jerked his six-gun and three rapid gunshots punched across the plain.

At the signal, the cordon of men around the Sash dissolved. Mounting their ponies, they streamed toward Turman and bunched around him. Then the block of riders began to move away, heading northward, in the direction of the firing.

"Manton's acoming!" ejaculated Sam, setting the spyglass aside and grabbing his Winchester. "We got 'em on the run!" he yelled. "Let's go get 'em!"

Seven eager punchers at his heels—lead had cut down their strength—he jumped the barrier and raced out. "Cawdl!" he muttered, "If we only had horses!"

Spreading, the eager knot of punchers moved across the flat at a clumsy run. It was hard going for men in high-heeled riding boots. Chest heaving, Sam gestured for them

to slow to a walk. Now the forms of dust-shrouded riders, beyond Turman's slow-moving bunch were plain.

Apparently unaware of the men advancing in their rear, Turman's men checked, spread and halted. Stealthily now, Sam's little force slipped forward through squatty greasewood. Quickly, the line of horsemen were within rifleshoot. Sam dropped to one knee, levered a shell into the breech, aligned and squeezed trigger. A Turman rider jerked spasmodically, and slid sideways out of his saddle. Rifles began spewing lead on either side of Sam. Another rider sagged, and a third was blasted out of leather.

Uncertainty gripped Turman's riders. They bunched, stirring dust in seething confusion. Some wheeled and snapped shots at the line of punchers advancing through the brush. Meanwhile, lead pecked at them. A fourth rider went down. He hit the ground, a boot heel jammed in a stirrup. His mount dashed off, the body bumping beside it.

Beyond the milling horsemen, Sam saw the rapidly approaching Frying Pan bunch fan out. Their guns began to flash.

Several Turman riders suddenly streaked off westward. Others spurred in their wake, until the entire band was strung across the swales, frantically urging their ponies in desperate retreat.

When Manton and his men cantered up, the survivors of Turman's force were fast disappearing in the distance.

"You're sure a sight for sore eyes," Sam told the whiskered rancher. Then he regarded Cherokee, tailing the cowman, with no enthusiasm. "And I crave a word with you, later."

The entire contingent straggled toward the ranch. Sam motioned Cherokee aside. "Who in thunder been sitting on your shirt tail?" he demanded.

"We run plumb into a fistful of Box riders heading a bunch of Frying Pan stock for the hills," explained the breed. "Manton got his bristles up and took after them. We gaunted our ponies in the chase, and most never made it."

"One more day," said Sam tersely, "and we'd have been

shaking hands with Saint Peter. Turman was using blasting powder."

A Sash hand, on a borrowed pony, spurred away to bring in the hidden remuda. Manton listened in frowning silence when told of the mixed herd of rustled Frying Pan, Sash and SCC stock, now recaptured.

"Wal," he wanted to know, "what we going to do about it?"

"Go get 'em!" shot back Sam. "We got the coyotes on the run. Let's smoke 'em out."

The desert-eroded cowman's jaws worked on a chew. "Wal, what are we waiting for?" he demanded.

Sam grinned, the whiskered rancher was a man after his own heart. Clustered on the bench from which Sam had launched his raid upon Turman's rustled herd, the pursuing riders eyed the shallow bowl below them and the apparently deserted buildings of The Lazy E nestling in the hills beyond. The bowl was dotted with steers, plainly too trail-weary to stampede. The Lazy E riders had thrown them into the bowl and left them.

The sinking sun burnished the bald hilltops and converted draws and canyons into pools of shadow.

"Ready for the taking," said Manton, eying the grazing stock.

"You forgetting Turman still packs a punch?" Sam nodded in the direction of the ranch. "I say, when you crave to rid yourself of hornets, destroy the nest."

"I guess we got no option," put in Heger doubtfully, "but odds are that Mark's sending more guns to back up Turman. We're liable to have a swarm of gunslicks helling all over us afore sun-up."

Sam nodded. "We've sure got no time to kill," he agreed. The same thought had hit him. Unless they struck fast and moved out, they were likely to get in exactly the same jam that Turman's force had at the Sash. Then he grinned at a sudden thought. "I got a notion Turman's bunch won't last long," he assured them, and lifted his reins.

A long, jingling string of riders, they filed down into the bowl. As they wound toward the ranch, gunfire licked from

windows. In the fading light, Sam headed into the shelter of a brushy draw and dismounted. "Rest your saddles!" he told the riders thronging around.

Afoot, with Cherokee, he eased through the chaparral surrounding the ranch. Shoulders of the hills, knifed by ravines thick with tangled brush, sloped down to its corrals. Their objective, the square clapboard ranch house which faced a squat bunkhouse across a bare yard. To one side stood a barn and open-sided wagonshed.

"Figure you could get close to the house, come dark, without stopping lead?" inquired Sam, as they bellied in brush and peered at the building.

"My paw could have ghosted inside and stole their guns," grunted the 'breed. "I figure I'm half as good."

"You better be!" said Sam.

Back in the draw, he laid out his plan to Heger and Manton. "I got two Giant cartridges, donated by Turman," he said. "Have your boys surround the spread. Open up but shoot high. That'll keep 'em occupied. Me and Cherokee will injun in, plant a powder charge and blow up the shebang."

"It ain't my way of fighting," drawled Manton, "but Turman called the play."

"Blow the lobo into hell," growled Heger, "like he blowed my place."

Afoot, Winchesters in hand, punchers filed out of the draw, ghostly in the dim light, to work their way to positions around the ranch. Soon only Sam and Cherokee remained, with a solitary horse tender. Sam crushed a glowing cigarette, removed two Giant cartridges from a saddlebag and stuck them inside his shirt.

Quiet had descended upon the ranch, a brooding quiet like that which precedes a howling desert storm. From the bowl came the muted bellow of a steer, and the distant screech of a mountain lion set the ponies pawing restlessly.

Then a Winchester spanged, joined by others, until the hills reverberated with the mingling roar of guns.

"I guess," said Sam, "we roll our tails."

Cherokee leading, they moved down the draw. When they

were clear of the brush, lances of fire marked the dim bulk of the house. Ringing it, guns spilled lead, the powder-flashes blooming like pale roses against the night. "I sure hope," said Sam fervently, "our boys are slanting their barrels up."

Cherokee advanced behind the shelter of the barn, then dropped, slithering along a wire fence, Sam dogging behind.

Wriggling under the fence, the 'breed eased toward a water trough, at the end of the yard, motioned for Sam to remain, slid around the trough and disappeared.

Hugging the ground, sheltered by the trough from defenders' gunfire, Sam watched rifle flashes licking from the brush behind him and shrank instinctively when an occasional slug plowed ground close by. Some excited puncher was forgetting his instructions to fire high.

Suddenly, silent as a shadow, Cherokee slid to his side. The 'breed jerked his head and moved off again. Sam wormed behind him. Lead droned and whined over their heads. Thankfully, the rider followed his guide into a crease in the ground, soggy with mud, that carried run-off from the trough. The shallow ditch angled toward and past the house.

Hands sticky with mud, he crept ahead, following the 'breed's boots. Like a wall, the house loomed above them. Cherokee crawled out of the ditch, Sam behind him. Scarce three feet above their heads a rifle barrel protruded from a window, throwing flame. They slithered up to the house and lay pressed against it. He saw that the building was raised six inches or so from the ground, set upon a foundation of flat rocks. He thrust a grimy hand inside his shirt, brought out the two cartridges, twisted their fuses together, set them carefully under the house. Then he fumbled in a pants pocket for his block of stinkers. With mounting despair he scratched one after another, without result. Water in the ditch had soaked through. The matches were soggy and useless. Cherokee, stretched silent beside him, pulled out a brass cartridge case, the open end corked. Fastening his teeth on the cork, the 'breed jerked it free and spilled half a dozen dry matches into Sam's outstretched hand. With a sigh of

relief, the rider struck one, held the flame to the fuse. Immediately, the curled wicks hissed and spluttered.

Sam jerked around. "Get the hell out of here!" he whispered urgently, "Or we'll be scrambled eggs."

Before he could move, Cherokee had vanished.

He scrambled back into the ditch and began to crawl as fast as the slime would allow along its slippery length. The water trough was still ahead when he realized he had no chance of reaching it before the explosion. Those fuses had been almighty short.

He checked, worked down into the soft, stinking mud. Hands clapped to his ears, face pressed into the ooze, he waited, braced for the shock—and hoping.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

MUD-SMOTHERED, Sam awaited the explosion. When it came, the impact slammed him down like a mighty fist. He raised his head, features smeared with slime, but could see nothing through a pall of floating dust. Debris began to thud around him. As the dust settled he saw that the entire side of the house had collapsed into a pile of wreckage. The roof sagged, threatening to crash at any moment. Flame licked from the disorder of splintered timbers. The frantic yelling of men trapped in the wreckage chilled his spine.

All firing had cut off. He came to his feet, dripping mud.

Flames were wavering upward now, devouring the sun-dried clapboard, mounting higher and higher, bathing the brush and buildings around with errie, reddish light.

Heat from the blazing ruins beat across the ditch. He backed away, spun around as a puncher pushed out of the brush, finger on the trigger of a levelled rifle.

"Hold it!" blurted Sam.

The other, a Frying Pan hand, eyed his mud-daubed features and thick-plastered garb. "First off I figured you for a mud turtle," he drawled. "You the gent who set off the firecracker?"

Sam nodded. Together, they rounded the wreckage, now blazing with a deep-throated, consuming roar. The roof crashed and myriad sparks flew upward. Other punchers were emerging from the brush. They surrounded a knot of five bewildered Lazy E riders who had escaped and now stood in the yard, senses still stunned by the explosion, staring dull-eyed at the conflagration. There was plainly no fight left in them.

Sam's quick glance told him that Turman was not among the prisoners. He headed for the water trough to wash off as much filth as he could. The prisoners were herded toward the draw and men began to drain away. Cherokee crossed to where Sam, torso bare, was sloshing his shirt in the trough.

"Figured we'd scrape you up with a spade," he rasped.

Sam grinned. "Only the good die young!" He jerked his head at the gutted ruins. "I guess that settles Turman's hash."

"You got another guess coming," growled the 'breed. "Turman made a beeline for the Box, I got it from one of the gunsharks we corralled."

"So Turman vamoosed!" Sam shrugged into his wet shift. "Then we got more trouble ahead."

In the early hours, the much travelled herd was once again thrown into the Sash horse pasture. The prisoners were lodged in the barn and a guard set. Tired punchers flopped over the bunkhouse floor and slept, too bone-weary to set bunks back in place.

Sam awoke in full sunlight, came stiffly to his feet and blinked at recumbent forms around him. Wandering outside, he saw smoke drifting from the cookshack chimney. When he pushed inside, he found bleary-eyed punchers gathered around the stove, swilling coffee. He emptied a steaming mug gratefully and learned that Heger and Manton were out in the pasture.

Rigging the buckskin, he jogged across the swales.

The two cowmen were hunkered nearby the three-strand barbed wire fence.

"Wal," drawled Manton, when he rode up, "we made a quick tally—150 Sash, 100 SCC and 200 cow critters carrying my brand. I reckon we should string up them bustards we corralled."

"Nope!" objected Heger. "Let's do it legal. I figure we should hit for town, turn the mavericks over to the law and swear out a warrant for Turman."

"Save your time!" advised Sam, and swung out of leather.

"The sheriff got no choice but jail the bustards," expos-

tulated Heger. "We got the evidence," he indicated the grazing steers, "and we can produce a slew of witnesses."

Sam dropped down beside them. "Gus," he pointed out patiently, "Mike O'Dell takes orders from The Three. You'll get no action on a rustling charge."

"O'Dell swore to enforce the law," insisted the graying rancher. "He got no option."

"Couldbe," contributed Manton, "we could make a deal with The Three, through the sheriff, and end this trouble. We drop charges, The Three lay off our stock."

"You're loco!" snapped Sam. "We hit 'em hard, let's keep on hitting! Drive the SCC steers back to Langstrom. With that evidence I gamble he'll throw in with us. Then we hit the Box with all we've got."

Heger shook his head. "That Limey won't take a hand, we know that. Let's make a deal, like Manton says."

"I say, save our breath—and fight," insisted Sam.

Manton looked up, amusement in his faded eyes. "You're a fire-eating young colt, Sam. If your reputation says anything, you'd sooner fight than eat. Me and Heger, we've had a bellyful of fighting. Reckon we'll ride to town."

Sam locked his lips, realizing the futility of argument.

Later that day, the two old cowmen pulled out, with four armed punchers to guard their prisoners.

Sam and Cherokee perched on the top rail of the corral and watched the party ride away. "The doggoned hammer-heads!" ejaculated Sam, with disgust. "Make a deal! Who could make a deal with a wolf pack? Turman will bust his guts to give them their comeuppance, and all they'll get out of Mark will be a kick in the pants."

"I guess they'll learn—the hard way," growled Cherokee.

Sam slid down from the rail. "Let's cut out the SCC stuff and haze it back. The Limey's our hole card, if he won't fight we're through."

Ninety-eight SCC steers, pushed along by Sam and his four remaining riders, moved east across the flats that afternoon. With sundown, they camped on Medicine Creek, the stream that coiled down the length of the Basin like a tired

snake. The sun rode high the following day when they sighted the gleaming white buildings of the SCC. Sam spurred ahead.

As before, the manager's buxom wife answered his rap on the ranchhouse door. "Well, if it isn't the man who likes my lemonade!" she smiled.

"Ma'am," he drawled, "that concoction packs a kick that would put a mule to shame. I sure would savor another sip, but first I crave to palaver with your husband."

"First a drink for a hot, dusty man," she corrected, "then Leighton."

Langstrom came out while Sam sat relaxed in a rocker, nearing the bottom of a tall glass. The rider set his glass aside and rose. "A bunch of your steers strayed," he said drily, "I picked 'em up—in the Blackwater Hills."

The manager turned and gazed across the plain. Far off, the hills shimmered, bleak and forbidding.

"Impossible!" he exclaimed. "Why, that is beyond Frying Pan and Window Sash range."

"Maybe they sprouted wings," suggested Sam gravely. "Take a look-see!"

With a puzzled glance, the manager turned away. He crossed the yard to the horse barn, emerged leading a saddled chestnut gelding. Sam joined him and led the way toward where a verdant wall marked the creek. The rustled stock was spread along its bank, bunched in the shade of cottonwood and willow.

With frowning gaze, Langstrom looked over the weary, dustplastered animals. Hocks ragged and horns broken, they were a sorry sight.

"They look," he said, "as though they were survivors of a battle."

"That's just what they are," threw back Sam, and told of the events of the past few days. "You still convinced The Three ain't swinging a wide loop?" he concluded.

"Unbelievable!" murmured the manager. "I presume you have reported all this to the sheriff?"

"Heger and Manton rode to town for that very reason," Sam built a cigarette, then added, "Waste of breath!"

"Nonsense," barked Langstrom. "We have law in this state. The evidence is indisputable. No elected official could fail to take action."

"That's where you're dead wrong," the rider told him sorrowfully. "There's no law in Sweetgrass Basin, outside of gun law. You better oil up your own gun, mister, because you're due to lose plenty more stock."

The SCC manager said nothing, but from the tight line of his lips and the anger in his eyes it was plain that evidence of wholesale rustling had aroused him.

"Wal, you got your steers back," said Sam, lifting his reins. "Guess I'll ride."

"Wait!" Langstrom fingered his mustache. "I am in your debt. You certainly deserve some—compensation."

"The only way you can pay me," said Sam slowly, "is buckle on your gun and give me a hand enforcing the law. The Three got a grip on the sheriff just like that." He held out his right hand and clenched the fist.

"You must be mistaken," remonstrated the other. "The whole thing is incredible." He hesitated, "There was an item in the newspaper which didn't put you in too good a light."

"Yep, I know," returned Sam resignedly, "Murder and rustling! The Three own the paper! You'll learn, but maybe you'll learn too late." He pulled away.

As the five riders jogged back toward the Sash, Sam recounted his talk with Langstrom to Cherokee. "Langstrom just don't know what to believe or which way to jump," he ended. "I was hoping he'd see the light but that story in 'The Sweetgrass Sentinel' sure damned me."

When they rode into the ranch, all hands were busy fixing the damaged bunkhouse. Heger was back and Manton had pulled out with his Frying Pan riders.

Heger slumped in a rocker on the porch, morosely eying the busy punchers. Sam dropped down beside him. "Wal, I guess you got them rustlers jailed and O'Dell packing a warrant for Turman," he threw out.

The rancher snorted. "Warrant, hell! O'Dell's guts have turned to fiddlestrings."

"You don't say!" prompted the rider.

Wearily, Heger rocked. "Turman got his licks in first," he explained. "He rode in and lodged a complaint that we rustled a bunch of Lazy E stock and gunned his hands."

"He forget to mention the attack on your spread?"

Heger raise his shoulders. "We gave O'Dell the straight. Mike listens very polite, then he says it's one cowman's word against another's. Seeing it was a standoff, he decides he'll have no truck with our whittle-whanging. So he hands Turman's boys their gunbelts and they ride away grinning like apes."

"Maybe now you're convinced," drawled Sam. "What you figure to do now—dicker with Mark?"

"Ain't nothing else I can do," returned the cowman drearily. "I'm sure in no shape to stand up to the rattlesnake."

So he'd gambled and lost, reflected Sam. Heger lacked the spunk to fight, Manton sure wouldn't take on The Three alone. If only the Limey with his big crew had taken a hand! That would have stiffened up Heger and Manton, and put a force of thirty or more in the field to buck Mark and his bunch. Now The Three could go ahead and wipe out its opposition ranch by ranch. He was no further ahead than when he started; in fact, he'd slid backward—he was dodging a murder warrant and there was \$1000 on his head.

"Gus," he said soberly, "Turman's as mean as a centipede with chilblains. That lobo will just naturally tear you apart. Mark will back his hand. I'd say you're cutting your own throat. Wal, it's your throat!" And what, he thought, was his own situation. Seemed his throat was already cut.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

With \$1,000 on his head, Sam kept a wary eye open for strangers. There were plenty hombres around the Basin, particularly among the imported gunfighters, who would shoot a man for his saddle. To them, "\$1,000—Dead or Alive" could prove an irresistible attraction.

The offering of a bounty had been a shrewd move on his half-brother's part. But he just couldn't figure why Mike O'Dell hadn't posted a reward for his apprehension on suspicion of Fatso's murder. Couldbe, he cogitated, the sheriff figured Mark's \$1,000 was sufficient bait for bounty hunters.

When dust smoked across the flats, announcing the approach of a rider, he gave it careful attention. The visitor proved to be a big slouch of a man, greasy and unkempt, forking a spur-scratched bay with a white-blazed forehead. He wore the battered Stetson, hickory shirt and dirt-cruste denims of the range, and a gun bumped below his thigh. When he dismounted by the gallery, Sam sauntered over for a closer look-see. The newcomer's features were broad and fleshy, with lumpish cheekbones and pale elusive eyes, centered by a huge curving beak of a nose.

Sam's forehead creased. He had seen this man somewhere, in the past. Then he remembered. It was Big Nose, a former Box hand. Bull had booted him off the ranch, years back, for mistreating a horse. After, he had hung around town, worked in the livery, drove a freight wagon. What brought Big Nose to the Sash?

"Looking for someone?" he inquired.

BATTLING BUCKEROOS

"Yep—you!" The puncher grinned, dug into a pants' pocket and brought out a creased envelope. Sam's heart skipped a beat as he saw the superscription. It was Milly Benson's handwriting. He tore the envelope open and unfolded a sheet of notepaper inside. A single sentence was written across it:

*Sam,
I must see you soon—
Milly*

His first swift thought was that this was a trap, instigated by Mark. But somehow he couldn't picture the impetuous daughter of Tom Walker involved in trickery. She had given him the impression, too, that she hated the cold, precise Mark.

He eyed Big Nose closely. "Howcome you latched onto this?"

"Mrs. Benson, at the hotel, give it to me," rumbled the puncher.

"She staying in town?" Big Nose nodded.

"And just why did you head for the Sash?"

"Every hombre in the Basin knows you're tied up with Heger and Manton. Figured Heger would pass it on."

Suspicion still rankled. He didn't like the girl's choice of messengers. This big slouch was the last man he'd trust. And what was itching her? Her need must be urgent; for she must realize that a man wanted for murder took a big chance venturing near town.

"I tend Mrs. Benson's cayouse at the livery," went on Big Nose. "She put out that she'd drop twenty dollars in the palm of any gent who could get a message to you. I figured it was easy money."

"Get yourself a mug of dip at the cookshack," said Sam. "Then you can take a note back."

He stepped into the bunkhouse and plunked down at a table, pulled out a stub of pencil and sat pondering his reply. He still didn't like it. Riding into town was as good as sticking his neck in a noose. Then remembrance of a clearing

BATTLING BUCKEROOS

on the creek bank about a mile north of Buffalo Fork entered his mind. Folks called it the Indian Campground. Families from town sometimes picnicked there and homesteaders, on occasion, used it for a camp spot. After nightfall it would be deserted. Beneath the girl's message, he wrote:

After sundown, Friday—Indian Campground, one mile north.

Sam

He folded the sheet and sealed it in a fresh envelope.

Watching Big Nose ride away, he couldn't banish the thought that this might somehow prove a trap. But could be the girl was in trouble, real trouble. He just had to take a chance.

Two days later, he hit leather as long shadows began to reach out from the hills. Heading east, he reached Medicine Creek and followed its curves at an easy pace. It was a pleasant ride, through the quiet of evening. Blue jays squawked in the willows, rabbits bobbed in and out of the brush, squirrels scurried from branch to branch.

Wary as a lobo, he reined into the camp ground amid thickening shadow. It lay quiet and deserted, a bare expanse, cleared of brush, specked with the ashes of old camp fires. Along the creek bank gnarled cottonwoods thrust high.

He dismounted, made a cigarette and paced uneasily. The very silence seemed to hold menace. For no reason, beyond itching unease, he swung into leather again, walked the buckskin along the darkened trail that led to town. Then he pulled off into the brush, thick-banked on either side, dismounted and stationed himself beside the shadowed trail—watching.

Stars were pricking through now. The trail wound away like a broad gray ribbon until it was swallowed by obscurity. He quickened as the sound of a pony's hoofbeats reached his ears. At a fast canter, it dashed past. Unseen, Sam smiled. The rider was obscure in the gloom, but he knew it was the girl—a canter was Milly's customary pace.

She never rode anything but a sweating pony. Relieved now, he led out his saddlehorse, mounted, then abruptly checked, tensed and listening. Another rider was traversing the trail.

He backed into the brush. The rider jogged past, no more than a blur in the gloom. Probably a rider from some outlying ranch, heading home, reflected Sam, and raised his reins. Ahead, he could hear the rhythmic drumming of a pony's hooves, gradually dying with distance. Then, abruptly, the drumming stopped. Sam jerked to a stop, too ears straining. But the only sound was the faint whisper of the creek.

The strange rider had halted. Why?

Sam eased his pony forward. The crackling of underbrush pulled him up short. Dismounting, he trailed his reins and slid through the darkness toward the sound, and came smack up against a saddle horse, tied to a willow. Its head raised. There was a white blaze on its forehead.

"Big Nose!" he murmured. "The dirty double-crosser. So he aims to collect my scalp, and a thousand smackers!"

He tied his own pony beside the bay, shucked his spurs and moved silently down trail.

When the gap that marked the campground yawned to his left, he paused. From the direction of the creek came the faint jingle of a bit chain. That would be the girl, waiting. Where was Big Nose—stalking?

He ghosted along the fringe of the brush, eyes searching the gloom, ears attuned for sound of movement. Overhead, the stars flamed. The campground was freckled with empty bottles and discarded cans.

Close ahead, a faint metallic tinkle reached his ears—the inadvertent contact of a boot with an empty can. He silently slid out his six-gun, Injuned forward. A shadow moved, steadied. Faint, he focussed the outline of a crouching man, rifle held in both hands. Softly, he stepped up behind Big Nose, jammed the hard muzzle of the six-gun into the small of the puncher's back. "Reach!" he growled.

He felt the big man quiver, then the rifle thudded down and Big Nose slowly straightened, raising both arms.

Sam reached around him with his left hand, slipped the buckle of a gunbelt. It, too, dropped.

"Now march!" barked Sam.

They neared the girl, standing uneasily by her pony. "Is that you, Sam?" she called tauntly.

"Yep," he threw back, "and a lousy bounty hunter."

She stepped toward them and eyed the prisoner, sullen in the starlight. "Big Nose!" she ejaculated. "How did he know I . . ."

"He just put two and two together," cut in Sam, "and it made a thousand. You got a rope?"

She moved quickly to her pony, came back with a coiled rope. Sam indicated a branch, outlined above them. "Toss a loop over that," he directed.

With practiced ease, the girl built a loop, twirled and dropped it over the branch. Sam yanked it down, flicked off the prisoner's hat and jerked the noose tight around his neck.

Stark terror in his eyes, Big Nose shrank back. "I was jest watching to see Mrs. Benson come to no harm," he averred hoarsely.

"Quit lying!" advised Sam curtly. He hauled in the slack, stretching the big man to stiff erectness, then secured the rope around the tree trunk. "We'll leave you on ice," he decided. Taking the girl's arm, he led her out of earshot. "Now," he inquired, "what's on your mind?"

"I've left Mark!" she returned tightly.

"Howcome?"

"Turman shot dad!" Her voice was brittle. "Killed him in cold blood." Words began to gush out now. "Dad would never take a hand in Mark's operations, but when you burnt Turman's place down they demanded he throw in, with his crew. You know dad—stubborn as a mule. He refused and Turman cut him down. Mark is just as guilty. He has the brains, Turman is his tool. I packed my things and rode to town. I'm staying at the hotel." Her voice broke. "Oh, Sam I'm so miserable, I don't know what to do."

His arms went around her and she lay against him, sobbing.

"That's just too bad!" he consoled. His voice brittle, "I'll get Turman. You just set tight."

After awhile, she pulled away, dabbing at her eyes with a wisp of handkerchief. "But you're a fugitive, Sam. Mark swears he'll see you hang. He's a devil, he scares me!"

"Mark will get his'n," he assured the agitated girl grimly. "As for that murder warrant," he laughed shortly, "would I murder a man in his bed?" He laid a gentle hand on her shoulder. "Now you get back to town. I've got to take care of Big Nose."

"You won't . . . hang the man?"

"He would have murdered me," he snapped, then smiled. "Quit fretting, would I waste a good rope?"

He steered her back to her pony.

Sam waited until the hoofbeats of the pony died along the trail, then strode to where the wouldbe bushwhacker stood stiff and silent. Casually, his captor loosed the end of the rope. As it slackened, the prisoner greedily sucked in air.

"Wal," inquired Sam, "you got any last words?"

"You ain't stringing me up?" croaked the prisoner.

In answer, Sam put his whole weight on the rope and hauled the big man off the ground. The body of Big Nose spun around, his legs pumped like those of a kicking frog.

Then Sam released his grasp and the half-throttled puncher dropped as a heavy as a sack of sand. He lay, a shapeless heap, choking and gasping.

"On your feet!" gritted his relentless captor, and yanked the rope. The prisoner staggered to his feet, swaying on rubbery legs.

"Last chance!" barked Sam. "You got anything for the record?" Again the rope tightened.

"Yep," gasped Big Nose. "Lemme live and I can clear you of lifting Bull's twelve thousand."

"Say that again!" Sam was all-attention now.

"Fatso grabbed the gold and passed it to Turman."

"You been chewing loco weed." Sam fingered the rope.

"Listen!" begged the prisoner desperately. "I was with Turman out at West Fork when word come from Mark that

you were heading for town with the gold. Turman sent me to tip off Deuce Durkin. I packed the gold to Turman."

"And that was the price of The Lazy E," murmured Sam. "It makes sense. And just what did you get out of it?"

"A hundred smackers, same as Fatso."

For a moment Sam nursed the wild idea of taking Big Nose to town and confronting him with the sheriff, but he dismissed it. Chances were the puncher would deny his story, and what chance would he—Sam Benson—have of leaving the sheriff's office once he ventured inside?

Resignedly, he flipped off the noose and loosened the thong with which he had lashed the prisoner's wrists behind him. "Hit leather," he advised, "and keep on riding, out of the Basin."

"Don't I get my guns?" grumbled Big Nose, tenderly fingering his throat.

"You're lucky to get your life," barked Sam. "Hightail!"

He stood watching the puncher shamble across the flat.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

A NEW Heger greeted Sam when he rode back to the Sash. The cowman was bubbling over with good spirits.

"You just met up with Santa Claus?" inquired Sam, perplexed. When he'd ridden out, Gus Heger had been a harried, hag-ridden man.

"Sure did!" chuckled the rancher. He waved toward the gallery, "Rest your legs and I'll make it plain. Me and Manton sure had the right idea."

Sam learned that the sheriff had ridden out with the news that Mark was ready and willing to parley. The Box boss proposed that they all meet in town, settle their differences and work together to end rustler trouble. The Box was willing to stay south of West Fork, Turman would abandon the Lazy E and resume his old job as Box foreman.

"Doggone good news, if it's true," commented Sam.

"We hit The Three hard," pointed out Heger complacently. "I gamble Mark's had a bellyful. What's more, you're in on the pow-wow. Mike says he'll put that warrant on ice. We kin bring every doggone gun we crave into town, so there'll be no shenanigans." He rocked contentedly, "It'll sure be nice to settle down and raise stock again."

Sam chewed a cigarette, considering all this. Deep-seated distrust of Mark warned him there was a trap, somewhere.

"I don't like it!" he declared.

"Sure you don't!" agreed the rancher equably. "You're a fire-eating son of a gun, Sam. You and Mark never did hit it off. We got just what we wanted and you got to play along. I sent word to Manton."

It was plain to Sam that anything he might say would be waste of breath. The cowman saw nothing ahead but ruin if his heavy stock losses continued. To him this opportunity for peace was heavensent. Manton would see it the same way. Further, this parley had been their idea and they were naturally as puffed up as turkey gobblers that it was working out. All he could do was play along and brace himself for trouble; for intuition told him trouble was due just as sure as the sun set. Mark was hatching something.

Two days later, the two ranchers and Sam headed for town. Behind them, fifteen armed men strung out, every gun they could muster, outside of cooks and choremen.

Buffalo Fork drowsed under a scorching sun. If trouble was due, thought Sam, there was sure no sign of it here. A freight wagon ground down street, women gossiped at store entrances, shirt-sleeved townsmen drifted along the shaded plankwalks.

While the punchers piled into The Lone Star, their three leaders hit for the courthouse.

When they entered the sheriff's office, O'Dell hunched at his desk. The brawny lawman, thought Sam, seemed more apathetic then ever. It seemed as though the sap had dried up in him.

He swung around to greet them with a tired smile. "It's all set," he told the cowmen, paying scant attention to Sam. "Mark's over at the hotel."

"Then," said Heger jovially, "I guess we'll mosey over and fix things up." O'Dell made no reply, just raised his shoulders. He knows the deal's not on the up-and-up, reflected Sam, and he wants no part of it.

When the three dropped down the courthouse steps, he scanned the street, seeking some clue to the trouble he was convinced was brewing. Outside The Lone Star, Sash and Frying Pan ponies were tied thick. Citizens moved leisurely about their business. Then he grasped that something was missing—there wasn't a Box or Lazy E rider in town. Could-be, he reasoned. The Three didn't crave chance of a clash.

They jingled into the shabby hotel lobby. The spectacled

clerk greeted them affably. "Number six, gentlemen," he said. "Mr. Benson is expecting you."

All as smooth as calves' slavers, thought Sam. He murmured, "Come into my parlor, said the spider to the fly," and the clerk stared.

They clomped up the stairway. The door of 6 was ajar. Manton, in the lead, booted it open and stepped in. Sam, dogging the others, checked at the doorway and glanced quickly around.

Bed and bureau had been removed. A square table was set in the center of the room and six straightback chairs arranged around it. A bottle and glasses stood on the washstand. Occupying two of the chairs, on the far side of the table, were Mark and Snodgrass, the lawyer.

Sam's gaze lingered on his half-brother. This was his first sight of Mark for over five years. His precise half-brother had changed little, except that his features were sharper, more wolflike, and his blue eyes held a cold arrogance. He appeared to be a trifle more flamboyant, too. A flowing silk bandana replaced the former conservative cravat and diamond rings sparkled upon his carefully manicured fingers. Beside him, the plump Snodgrass, watery eyes buried in puffy features, a black clawhammer coat draping his rounded shoulders, reminded Sam of a puffed-up frog.

Then Sam transferred his gaze to a tall, rawboned figure lounging by the window and met the belligerent challenge of Turman's hard eyes. The swarthy foreman, he decided, hadn't changed a mite.

"Howdy, Tod!" he greeted amiably, "you got a Giant cartridge to spare?"

"No, but I got a slug branded with your moniker," growled Turman.

Mark raised a white hand. "Gentlemen!" he expostulated. Ignoring Sam, he motioned to the empty seats.

Chairs scraped as they all settled around the table.

Mark interlaced his fingers, gazing at the ceiling. "The purpose of this meeting, suggested by Gus Heger and Tom Manton," he intoned, "is to frame an agreement whereby

rustling will be checked and grazing areas clearly defined. Tod Turman will move his stock south of West Fork . . ."

"Since when did Turman own a cow—legitimate?" demanded Sam.

Mark frowned impatiently, then resumed, "The Box will take West Fork as its boundary. The Sash and Frying Pan will be assured undisputed usage of all range to the north."

"What's to prevent Turman and his gunsharks from raiding across West Fork?" inquired Sam.

"No god-damned killer on the lam!" grated the leathery-faced Lazy E owner.

Snodgrass raised pudgy hands in protest. "We are here to frame an agreement," he boomed, "not to banter unnecessary abuse."

For the first time, Mark fixed his half-brother with a cold, unwinking stare. "Have you any interest at stake?" he demanded icily.

"Yep, you conniving little crook," snapped Sam. "The Box!"

Unmoved, Mark transferred his attention to Heger. "Unless this—gunman—is removed," he announced abruptly, "the meeting is terminated."

Heger looked uncomfortable. Sam pushed back his chair. "It's so doggone whiffy around here," he declared, "I'm liable to choke." With that, he strode from the room.

Outside, standing on the plankwalk, he paused uncertainly, regretting his impulsiveness. Then, with a shrug, he headed for The Lone Star.

Before he reached the batwings, sound of celebration battered his ears. Pushing inside, he looked around with amazement at yelling, hilarious knots of punchers, pounding the tables, waving bottles, shouting, singing. The Sash and Frying Pan-contingents were gloriously, hopelessly drunk.

He sighted Cherokee sitting alone at a side table, eying the scene sardonically, and pushed past yammering men toward him.

"Thank Gawd you're sober," he said, and gestured to-

ward the yelling, prancing mob. "What in creation got into them?"

"Rotgut!" rasped the 'breed. "Deuce's orders—all the liquor they can guzzle, on the house."

The saloon owner's roly-poly form rounded the bar. A bottle of whisky in each hand, he moved across the floor, easing amiably past yelling men. Reaching the two at the side table, he set bottles before them. "Compliments of the house!" His round features creased with geniality. "Drink up, boys!"

"What the occasion?" inquired Sam.

"The end of lawlessness in the Basin," replied Deuce suavely.

With an abrupt movement of the arm, Sam swept the bottles off the table. They hit the gritty floor, bounced, the contents gurgling out. Cherokee dabbed down and grabbed one.

The smile faded from Deuce's moon-like features, his small eyes glinted, but he held his temper. "Quit acting hostile, Sam," he begged. "Let bygones be bygones."

"Not 'til I see you kicking at the end of a rope," gritted Sam. "Big Nose spilled his guts, you double-crossing son of a bitch. I should gun you right now."

A reeling puncher grabbed the saloon man's shoulder and spun him away, embracing him in a clumsy bear hug.

Sam met Cherokee's questioning gaze. "The coyote had Fatso feed me that knockout drop," he explained, and related Big Nose's story.

"I'd have blasted 'em both," grunted the 'breed, "but that don't say I don't fancy good whisky." He took a pull at the bottle.

"Just why would Deuce want the boys drunk?" frowned Sam.

"Should I worry?" rasped Cherokee, and tilted the bottle again.

Something was brewing, Sam could feel it, but there was nothing he could pin down. He sauntered over to the bar

and tossed the apron a beer check, came back with a mug of beer and settled down to kill time.

Shadows were beginning to finger across Main Street when he rose, weary of waiting. Cherokee was nodding sleepily. Three-quarters of the punchers were sprawled over tables or stretched on the floor, hopelessly drunk.

The hotel lobby was empty. Except for the clerk. Sam dropped into a leather rocker and rolled a smoke. A skirt rustled on the stairway and he came to his feet as Milly Benson ran down. "Howdy!" he greeted, "Where you been hiding away?"

"In my room!" Her smile was drawn. "I never thought I'd hide from any man. What brought Mark here?"

He told of the parley. "Another trick!" she declared.

They both turned as the swinging door was pushed back and a man's head protruded. "Deuce says to tell Mr. Benson everything's hunky-dory," he called to the clerk, and ducked out. It was the apron from The Lone Star.

"I must go!" said the girl, plainly agitated. "He may be down." Sam nodded almost absently as she hurried away, his mind busy with implications of the apron's remark. Milly was right, he pondered. Mark had an ace up his sleeve. He'd been stalling, stalling 'til the crews were good and drunk. Why?

Boots clattered on the stairway. Sam eyed the whole group as they descended. Mark, with Turman and the lawyer, hurried across the lobby and made abrupt exit. Heger and Manton approached him. Both, he observed looked tired and disgusted.

"Wal?" he challenged.

"We got nowheres," snapped Manton. "Meet again tomorrow."

"The lawyer got me buffaloed," confessed Heger. "The hombre tangled everything up, kept drafting papers that never got us nowhere."

"They were stalling," said Sam. "There's shenanigans afoot."

"Guess we best book rooms," said Manton resignedly.

"You got no choice," grunted Sam. "Ain't a puncher can sit a saddle. The mavericks are dead drunk, to the last man."

He moved away. "I'm moseying around. I just don't fancy the way things are shaping up."

Outside, Main Street was a canyon of darkness and quiet as boothill, except for sounds of hilarity from The Lone Star.

A rider fogged down street. When he passed through yellow shafts of light slanting from saloon windows, Sam saw he was riding bareback, with rope reins, and one arm hung limp.

Sam's glance followed him as he checked his pony, whirled and came back at a walk, head swerving as he searched the plankwalks. Sam stepped out to intercept him and saw it was a Sash cowpoke known as Tumbleweed. The puncher had stopped a slug in the shoulder during the siege. His right arm was useless and he had been left, alone, at the ranch. "Looking for someone?" inquired Sam.

"Yep—the boss!" Tumbleweed's voice was honed to a sharp edge of excitement. He burst out, "All hell's broke loose in the Basin."

"Such as?" questioned Sam, suddenly taut.

"A pack of lobos pounced on the spread this a.m. They put the torch to every building, gutted the bunkhouse and smashed the windmill." He paused to catch his breath. "What's more, they ran off our horse herd. Herded me along too, heading for the Box. Come dark, I lit a shuck, grabbed this hoss and hit for town. From their talk, The Frying Pan got the same treatment."

Light finally broke upon Sam. Mark had set the meeting to lull the ranchers and their crews into town. While he stalled at the hotel, and Deuce plied the punchers with rot-gut, Box gunhands were ravaging the undefended Basin. His half-brother had wiped out competition with one savage, relentless sweep.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

BATTLING a deadening sense of futility, Sam led the puncher to the hotel. The two cowmen were comfortably settled in rockers, trading talk. He stood silently by while Tumbleweed related his story.

"The double-crossing, sheepherding coyote!" exploded Manton. Heger said nothing. It was plain from a glance at his stricken features that this new blow had hit him hard.

Manton came to his feet.

"Where you heading for?" inquired Sam.

"Gather my boys and hit the trail of the rattlesnakes!" roared the whiskered cowman.

"Set tight!" Sam advised him stonily. "There ain't a Frying Pan hand in shape to ride. What's more, Mark's bunch are likely on your trail, right now. We're in a jackpot, and all hell's liable to break loose."

Answering the question in three pairs of eyes, he continued, "Mark won't be boss 'till he smashes all opposition. The opposition's sprawled out in The Lone Star—dead drunk. I'll stake my saddle his boys bust in, shooting, before the sun rises. This is a cleanup."

Belligerence gleamed in Manton's eyes as the import of his words sank home, but Heger just nodded in dejected agreement.

"Shoot up the crews—in town?" queried Tumbleweed, wide-eyed.

"Why not?" threw back Sam. "Mark's got the sheriff eating out of his hand." He turned away.

"You ain't hightailing, leaving us in a tight?" demanded Manton.

"Nope, I'm spreading the alarm," said Sam curtly, "and you better get busy, sobering up your waddies."

He hurried across street and loosed the reins of his saddle horse, tied outside The Lone Star. Mounting, he raised the pony to a canter, turned up one of the side roads that angled into Main Street and in minutes was riding through the residential section.

Darkened homes bulked on either side. A cat jumped off a fence and streaked across his path, and a baby wailed in the night. Gunfire and killing seemed far distant.

He drew rein at a rambling, two-story bungalow, horse barn in its rear, all enclosed by a picket fence. Crunching up a gravel path, he rapped sharply on the front door. After a space, the door swung open and Julius Kaufman, candlestick held high, stood blinking in the doorway. A long night-shirt flapped around the merchant's shanks and a tasseled nightcap clung to his head.

"There's trouble brewing—big trouble!" said Sam shortly.

"Step inside!" invited Kaufman quietly, as though this midnight visit was a routine occurrence.

The rider followed him into a richly furnished living room, his boots sinking into thick carpet. Flickering candle light gleamed upon polished furniture and gilt-framed pictures on the walls.

Kaufman motioned him to a chair, set the candlestick on a side table and sat down himself, "Well," he questioned, "what's the trouble?"

Briefly, Sam told him of the trap into which the two ranchers had ridden while their spreads were devastated; how Mark had killed time while Durkin poured rotgut into the crews. "Right now," he wound up, "my guess is that Mark's bunch are heading for town to finish the job—clean up on the crews. That means the worse gunfight this town ever saw, likely, before it's through, Main Street will be a shambles, women and children shot. We've got to do something—fast."

The storekeeper listened with grave attention, his calm gaze never leaving Sam's face. "Just what do you suggest?" he prompted.

"Stiffen O'Dell's spine! This is above politics." The rider's voice deepened with urgency. "Have Mike arm and deputize the citizens. There must be a hundred men in town who could carry arms. Get them organized! You've got to work fast, Mark's lobos may be in town any time now."

"So this is the climax," said Kaufman, with taut anger. "A fool drunk with power, weak-kneed public officials, the indifference of good citizens. Now we have a blood bath!" He straightened. "I'll dress and arouse the few I can depend upon. We'll wait upon the sheriff and demand action. If O'Dell shirks, we'll take action ourselves. This town has been tyrannized long enough."

Sam was conscious of dawning hope as he rode away. Kaufman, a man of peace, had proved steady as a rock in time of trouble. If anyone could arouse the townsfolk to realization of the consequences of a pitched battle upon Main Street, it was the storekeeper. And Sam had a hunch that when Kaufman pushed, he pushed hard.

Back on Main Street, he found a bleary-eyed knot of riders gathered around Manton outside the hotel. There were less than a dozen. "All that could stand up on their hind legs," volunteered the cowman, eying the gather with bleak disgust. "They're so doggone shaky I doubt if they could press a trigger." He nodded across the street, where light bloomed in the windows of the New York Grill. "I got Ah Wing out of his blankets. The Chink's brewing coffee."

They shepherded the woe-begone bunch of punchers to the restaurant, where Ah Wing handed out steaming mugs of the black fluid.

"I don't see Heger around," commented Sam.

"Gus beat it." The whiskered cowman seemed apologetic. "Spilled some loco talk about hunting up Mark."

Sam frowned with perplexity. "What does he figure to get out of Mark?"

"I reckon a drowning man would grab a straw. The hombre's desperate. He got a big loan coming due at the bank. The Three been draining him dry. Now they wiped out his spread he's got nothing but debts."

"So he run out!"

Manton raised his shoulders.

In the gloom outside the restaurant, Sam was conscious of activity. Boots drummed the plankwalk and he heard the clatter of weapons. The whole town was buzzing like a disturbed beehive.

Dawn found the bulk of Heger's and Manton's waddies at least partially sober, if dull-eyed and leaden-headed. Hunkered along the front of the hotel, they reminded Sam of a row of broody sage hens.

Growing light revealed knots of armed citizens scattered the length of Main Street. There were men of all ages, with every variety of weapon, from buffalo guns to sporting rifles. They were unshaven, hastily dressed, bewildered.

Mike O'Dell came down the center of the street with Julius Kaufman, checking over the hastily recruited guards. This was more like the O'Dell of old, thought Sam. The sheriff seemed to have shed a dozen years. He was revitalized. He walked erect and his voice held its former roaring breeziness.

Then taut silence held the street. Mark's force rode in. The swarthy Turman leading, they jogged into town from the north. Sam counted thirty-eight riders, a long, seemingly never-ending cavalcade; tough, dust-plastered horsemen with alert eyes and guns slung low. If they were surprised by sight of the armed reception committees dotted along the plankwalks they gave no sign. Without pause, they jingled past groups of still-faced citizens. At the far end of Main Street they halted and bunched.

Tension built up as each side waited for the other to make a move. Shadows fled and sunlight flooded the wide stretch of sandy street. Still the menacing block of horsemen bulked at the southern end—silent, threatening.

Sam felt his nerves tightening up until they were taut as fiddle strings, and the tight-drawn faces of those around him showed he was not alone. Inevitably the strain must be relieved by action. One gunshot, he reflected, and Main Street would become a bullet-whipped hell.

O'Dell passed again, breaking up the groups of low-talking townsmen and spacing them along the plankwalks. Sam could have sworn the sheriff was actually happy, as though he had shed a cumbering burden.

Then the tension snapped—with the deep boom of a buffalo gun, triggered by some nervous or overly-belligerent citizen. Instantly, other reports followed, swelling into an ear-splitting racket as Winchesters, Sharps, shotguns, six-guns joined the chorus, all flinging lead—much of it impotent—in the direction of the horsemen upstreet.

Sam saw ponies plunging and circling, amid churning dust. One rose high, forelegs flailing, squealing with pain; an unhorsed rider rolled over and over across the ruts, ironshod hooves hammering around him. Then the block broke up and the riders strung out, racing down street in a wild charge. Past stores and blaring guns they swept in mad stampede, their six-guns winking and roaring, raking the plankwalks with droning lead. Sam dropped flat. His six-gun bucked as riders streamed past, dim through curtains of rising dust. All around him was tumult—groans of the wounded, crash of breaking glass, the lash of gunfire. Some townsmen panicked, racing for the shelter of alleys; others stood their ground, flinging lead; the real quarry, Frying Pan and Sash punchers, bellied along the plankwalk, six-guns blaring.

Suddenly there was comparative quiet as the racing horsemen pounded out of sight. Sam plugged out his empties and inserted fresh loads. Peering through the fog of powder smoke and floating dust that veiled the street, he endeavored to locate the attackers. Then, with a mighty drumming of hooves they cycloned past again, and shouts and shrieks mingled with the reverberating roar of guns. This time their lead was more deadly, scourging the plankwalks, shattering store windows, searching the alleys, slashing, slaying.

Once again there was blessed respite and Sam came to his feet. As the dust began to settle, he focussed the avenging horsemen, bunched again, far up street. Around him was chaos—plankwalks littered with broken glass and fallen men; dazed citizens bandaging each other's wounds; a white-

faced storekeeper shaking his fist at the distant riders and cursing incoherently; a woman sobbing over a bloodied form; two crazed townsmen flailing a downed rider, already dead, with their clubbed rifles.

Another charge like that, he reflected, and Turman's riders would clear Main Street. These bewildered townsmen, with their motley of guns, were no match for hardened fighting men. He glimpsed Julius Kaufman, a rifle slanted under one arm, standing at the mouth of the alley beside his store, gloomily eying the scene of confusion, and headed for the storekeeper.

"We can't hold 'em!" he told Kaufman abruptly.

The other nodded, taut with anger. "Mark must be mad," he said. "The whole state will be shocked by this senseless slaughter."

"I gamble Mark's miles away, out at the Box," returned Sam. "He never could stomach gunsmoke. Turman's running this show and Turman's worse than a mad dog when he gets his dander up. The lobo's liable to wreck this town if we don't stop him."

"He can't be stopped!" Kaufman gestured hopelessly at the plankwalk, cumbered with dead and injured men.

"I figure to try!" Sam weighed the blotch of riders up street. "Get me two Giant cartridges and a crowbar. Make it fast, before they charge again."

The storekeeper swung around and Sam dogged him down the alley. They clambered up upon the loading platform in the rear of the store. Sam waited while Kaufman ducked inside. Quickly, the storekeeper was back, two Giant cartridges in one hand and a crowbar in the other.

Sam stuffed the cartridges into a pants pocket and grabbed the crowbar, jumped from the platform and hurried along the rear of stores. He had marked that Turman's riders were bunched in front of Carth's Saddlery. As he threaded between stacks of discarded boxes and barrels, he noted that men were furtively slinking out of alleys and trickling across the flat, all heading for the shelter of the thick brush beyond. The will to resist was fading and the defense melting fast.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

SIGNS OF movement ceased when he left the center of town behind. Everyone had fled the south end of Main Street. Cautious now, he darted from rubbish pile to rubbish pile, heading for the rear of Garth's Saddlery. Finally, he crept up behind the square rock-and-adobe building. As he expected, the rear door was padlocked. Inserting the crowbar in the padlock, he wrenched it off, eased the door open and slid inside. He found himself in a storeroom. There was always means of access to a store roof. He glanced around, sighted a wooden ladder spiked against a side wall. At its head was a closed trapdoor. Dropping the crowbar, he ran up the ladder, pushed up the hinged door and stepped out onto the roof.

Bent low, he ran toward the front, where a wooden facade, waist high, blocked his view of the street. Yanking off his Stetson, he took a quick peek over the facade. Below, Turman's riders were bunched in the street. Compared with the scene of crazed excitement he had just left, a matter-of-fact calm reigned here. To these hired gunhands the fracas was just a chore, part of the day's work. Some slacked in their saddles, smoking; others tightened cinches or stood trading talk. Turman, forking his skewbald pony, was down street aways, alone, eying the battered length of Main Street.

Then Sam ducked down and gave attention to the job he had in mind. Carefully, he laid the two Giant cartridges on the parapet, behind the facade. Striking a match, he touched light to a fuse, picked up the cartridge and alertly eyed the spluttering wick. This was chancy work, he reflected. If he

threw the cartridge too soon, the riders would scatter and he'd never have another chance. If he held it too long he'd be blown sky high.

Gauging the speed of burning, he eyed the sparking fuse. Then, with slow deliberation, he straightened, swung his right arm and hurled the cartridge. Scarcely had he flattened against the roof when the detonation almost split his eardrums. The building beneath him quivered, glass jingled and crashed. From the street rose a confusion of sound—ponies squealing; men yelling, shrieking, shouting; hooves pounding. He came to his knees, reached for the remaining cartridge and stood erect. Dimly, through a gray, swirling fog, he glimpsed a bloody hash below, a welter of men's torn bodies, the carcasses of ponies, injured riders dragging through the dust. And, beyond, madly racing horsemen as the survivors spurred desperately away.

In seconds, the street was clear, except for the sickening debris in the street. He pocketed the second cartridge and slowly walked back across the roof.

With no exhilaration, he dropped down the ladder and trudged back over the rubbish-strewn flat. Danger from Turman and his gang had been eliminated, at least for the present, but the scene of carnage outside Garth's Saddlery had turned his stomach. A gunfight he could savor, but not wholesale maiming and killing with explosives.

Kaufman was waiting for him. The storekeeper regarded his somber features keenly. "You did well, Sam," he said quietly. "It was horrible, but it saved the town." Sam handed him the Giant cartridge. "Never again!" he declared, "Not even to save my own life."

Townpeople were already busy along Main Street, repairing the scars of the gunfight, removing dead and wounded, clearing away debris, sweeping up broken glass. There was no jubilation over defeat of Turman's gunfighters. Men worked in silence, stunned by the rush of events, still finding it difficult to believe that the town had been attacked and riders had raged down Main Street like ravenous Comanches, shooting and killing.

Sam joined Manton on a bench outside the hotel.

"Guess that's the end of The Three," said the cowman.

"Guess again!" retorted Sam. "Mark's alive, Turman's alive. They still rod a slew of gunhands." He eyed the row of stores opposite, windows shattered; men packing a limp form; the rounded barrel of a dead pony bulging in mid-street. "I'd say The Three are riding high."

"The law . . ." began Manton.

"Law!" mocked Sam. "Gun law! King Colt still rods Sweetgrass Basin."

Then Manton tightened, staring down street. "Hell almighty!" he gasped. "They're back!"

Up and down street all work had ceased and every eye focussed a jingling cavalcade of riders, twenty or more, jogging into town. Held by taut, fearful expectancy, men watched and waited.

Sam recognized Langstrom's upright form in the lead, the Englishman rode straight as a cavalry trooper. "The SCC!" he exclaimed. "Now what brought them to town?"

He stepped out into the street with upraised hand. Langstrom checked beside him, looking around with a puzzled air.

"Tornado?" queried the manager.

"Yep, a tornado of lead," replied Sam grimly. "The Three! They staged a raid. You still neutral?"

"Neutral!" bristled the Englishman. "In face of what is occurring in this Basin? Are you aware that renegades have destroyed the Sash and Frying Pan? That they are looting indiscriminately? Two of my men have been shot. One may not live. I have come to demand and, if necessary, enforce action by the law."

New hope was born in Sam's mind. Here was a new and sorely needed ally. "You'll get no help from the law," he said, "but I can round up a dozen guns. With what you've got, we don't need the law."

"I prefer," said Langstrom stiffly, "to proceed through the regular channels, and proffer help to the sheriff, if necessary."

Sam shrugged. "All you'll get from O'Dell is alibis." He

returned to plump down beside Manton again. "The Limey's stirred up," he reported, and added, with disgust, "He's still banking on the law."

He watched the SCC punchers pull up to the windowless Lone Star saloon and pile inside. Langstrom stalked toward the courthouse, mounted its steps.

Two men emerged a few minutes later, the Englishman and the sheriff. They angled across street and Sam became aware that they were heading straight for the Frying Pan boss and himself.

"Manton," inquired the sheriff briskly, "how many hands you got in town?"

"Six mebbe," said the rancher.

"Sash can furnish another five," put in Sam, "and I rate four."

"Which gives us nigh forty guns," considered O'Dell. "Wal, gents, consider yourselves and your crews deputized."

"What for?" demanded Sam.

"I'm ridin' out to the Box to arrest Tod Turman and a flock of John Does on homicide charges," rapped out the sheriff. "I expect opposition and I'll need backing."

"You aim to arrest Turman?" Sam asked incredulously.

"That's what I said!" barked O'Dell. "From now on I rod the law in Sweetgrass Basin, not a pack of gunwolves."

Sam stared, speechless with surprise.

A small army jingled across the swales, heading south for the Box B. In addition to the crews of the three ranches, the sheriff had sworn in a posse of townsmen, seasoned old-timers, familiar with the whiff of gunsmoke. In all, Sam estimated, there must have been over fifty armed men. Yesterday, the situation had seemed hopeless; today, with the sheriff's sudden stiffening and with Langstrom's SCC crew, it had miraculously changed.

Poignant memories crowded his mind when the Box came into sight, sprawled in a verture-clad loop of Medicine Creek. His gaze roamed over the rambling rock-and-adobe ranch-

house, solid bunkhouse, hay barns, blacksmith shop. All were just as he remembered them, from five years back.

"They're herel!" he told the sheriff, indicating a big bunch of ponies drifting around the pasture. "Taking Turman sure won't be a cinch."

"I'll take the lobo!" replied O'Dell curtly. There was a decisiveness in his tone that had long been absent. The Three, considered Sam, had pushed the long-suffering sheriff too hard. Now he'd taken the bit in his teeth there was no stopping him. The attack on his home town had been the last straw.

Out of rifleshoot from the apparently sleeping spread, O'Dell halted the contingent. They sat their ponies, eying the buildings. There was not a man in sight, but the very silence held menace.

"May I suggest," put in Langstrom, "that we drive off the saddle stock, thus cutting off means of escape. Then we can surround our objective. Capitulation should be merely a matter of time."

The sheriff nodded. "Go right ahead! We'll ring the spread and close in. First, I got to give Mark Benson a chance to surrender the hombres."

"You ride into that yard," said Sam grimly, "and they'll likely fill you so full of lead you'll sink in brine."

O'Dell ignored him. "Get moving!" he grunted. "Bottle 'em up."

The riders scattered, streaming off on either side, throwing a cordon around the buildings. Two hit for the pasture. Still no sign of opposition developed.

The pasture had been cleared and men lay concealed around the ranchhouse. Peering from behind an angle of the wagon shed, Sam watched the sheriff ride into the yard—alone. O'Dell had spunk, he reflected. Any moment a storm of lead might erupt from the ranch and blast him out of the saddle.

Pulling rein in front of the house, the lawman turned toward it amid brooding silence. "Hello, the house!" he yelled.

"Hello yourself!" came back a surly shout, the first sign of life the ranch had yielded.

"I'm packing warrants for Tod Turman and every man who sided him in town."

"You aim to serve 'em?" Sam recognized Turman's derisive tones.

"I sure do!" promised O'Dell stonily.

"Beat it!" yelled Turman, "Afore you're so full of holes you won't hold hay."

In no haste, the sheriff lifted his reins, wheeled and walked his pony out of the yard. Sam released a sigh of relief when he drew out of rifle range.

By sundown, the attackers had infiltrated every building around the ranchhouse and riflefire crackled continuously, rising and falling in spasmodic bursts.

Eying gun flashes red-winking from the narrow slit windows of the massive rock-and-adobe building across the yard, Sam stood in the bunkhouse and visualized a long, weary siege ahead. The low-ceilinged bunkhouse was acrid with powder fumes as punchers threw lead.

Just how would Mark finagle out of this, he wondered. Faced with a showdown, his half-brother was not the type to risk lead. He had expected Mark to compromise and trust to his agile brain to ease him out of the tight. Could be Turman had got out of hand and taken over.

Through the night desultory gunfire continued. Set opposite the ranchhouse with only a bare stretch of yard between, the bunkhouse afforded the best view of the encompassed building.

With dawn, the sheriff and Langstrom made their appearance. O'Dell stood back from a window, eying the solid gray structure not a stone's throw distant, from which defiant lead droned monotonously.

"We got a long grind ahead," commented Sam.

O'Dell nodded. "Guess the varmints can spit in our eye, as long as their shells hold out."

"There is one expedient," put in Langstrom crisply.

"Blasting powder! I understand that it has already been utilized in this . . . er . . . campaign."

Sam thought of the welter of torn bodies on Main Street. The memory nauseated him even now. "Not that!" he protested.

The sheriff said nothing, just stood frowning, rasping his unshaven chin.

"I fail to see an alternative," retorted the Englishman.

"I got a hunch that with Turman out of there they'd quit," said Sam thoughtfully. "Gun-fighting's their trade. They can figure the odds and they know they got no more chance than a rabbit in a wolf's jaws. Mark can't stomach gunsmoke. It's just Turman, stiffening 'em up."

"And just how do you propose to remove friend Turman?"

"By working on his goddamned hate-soaked mind," said Sam tightly.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

SAM MOVED to a window, motioning the puncher who was busily throwing lead through it aside.

"Quit!" he bellowed. Punchers along the wall, firing through windows and improvised loopholes, pulled back, eying him curiously.

Three times he yelled before fire from the ranchhouse faltered, then died away.

"Take word to Turman," he shouted. "Tell the rattlesnake he don't have the sand to face my gun—Sam Benson's gun."

For moments there was silence, then a hoarse voice came back, plain across the yard, "Tod says he's acoming, smoking."

Sam wheeled to face O'Dell and Langstrom. "Tell the boys to quit firing," he directed shortly. "I'm going out!"

"Out there!" The Englishman gestured toward the yard. "It's suicide! Those renegades will simply wipe you out."

"You got a lot to learn, Limey," returned Sam.

The sheriff, tailed by several punchers, had slipped away. Gradually gunfire died. Waiting, watching the heavily timbered front door of the ranchhouse, Sam saw it slowly open. Turman's rawboned form came into view. In the growing light every detail of his swarthy features was plain. He paused on the threshold, darted a swift glance around, stepped out into the yard.

Sam strode to the door at the end of the bunkhouse, moved outside, rounded the angle of the building, and checked.

Not sixty paces apart, the two men stiffened. Sam was conscious of sudden, savage exhilaration. For as long as he

could remember, the malicious, coldblooded 'breed had plagued him worse than a boil. Turman had been behind his disgrace and expulsion from the Basin. There had never been anything but flaming hatred between them. At last the showdown had come.

Slowly, they shuffled toward each other. Sam kept his eyes on Turman's gun hand, poised above his holster, fingers extended like clutching talons, arm half bent. His own hand brushed the butt of his gun. The foreman was liable to blaze into action any instant.

Turman's right hand dabbed down. His gun was up and out, flaming, faster than a snake strikes. Sam heard the whine of lead as his own gun bucked and thundered. A spreading cloud of powdersmoke enveloped the two half-crouched figures.

Through the smoke haze Sam saw his opponent stumble, as though tripped, then recover. From habit he had been tallying his shots—there was one unused cartridge on the wheel, the fifth. His left hand whipped up and latched onto his gun wrist. Deliberately he aligned, the locked fist steadying his arm, and thumbed the hammer. Turman's beanpole form jerked erect at impact of the slug. Then the swarthy man's gun arm sagged, his smoking gun spilled to the ground from relaxed fingers and the rawboned form crashed down after it. Sprawled in the dust, the foreman quivered—just once—then was still.

Sam dropped his .45 into leather and stepped closer to the ranchhouse, right arm raised. "Listen!" he yelled. "We've got all the aces, which includes blasting powder. Come night-fall, we'll blow you to hell. Quit, before you crowd boothill."

"Jest so we can dance a strangulation jig!" derided an unseen defender.

"There'll be no hangings!" threw back Sam. "Chew it over!" He turned and paced back to the bunkhouse.

Shooting never started up again. Five, ten minutes passed, and men began to slowly file out of the ranchhouse into the yard. Sam watched from a bunkhouse window, counting. Ten, eleven, twelve men, but no sign of Mark. Hands shoulder

high, the defenders bunched in the dusty yard, shuffling uneasily. Emerging from cover, punchers and possemen were piling toward them.

Sam ran into the ranchhouse, questing from room to room. Three wounded men lay in one, but there was no sign of his half-brother. Perplexed, he came out, elbowed through the punchers thronging around the prisoners. "Any gent acquainted with Mark Benson's whereabouts?" he called out.

A wiry rider with flat-planed features spat. "I guess," he decided, "you'll locate the hombre in hell."

"The cowman, Heger, plugged Benson," volunteered another. "Just rode in quietlike, inquired for the boss, jerked his iron and let him have it. We planted 'em in the same hole."

Sam listened, still-faced. So that had been Heger's mission—to tag the man who had harried him, well knowing he would be wiped out himself. Mark's greatest terror—hot lead—had taken him in the end.

O'Dell pulled out with his posse and the prisoners, a wagonload of disabled men bumping behind. In twos and threes the punchers began to dribble back to town. Sam found himself riding with Cherokee.

"I sure played in luck," rasped the 'breed. "Had a good notion to cover that bet."

Sam snapped out of a fit of abstraction, cogitating upon the turn of events that had rid him of a relentless enemy and a half-brother who'd never quit trying to cut his throat.

"Bet!" he returned absently.

"You offered to stake a thousand cartwheels, back in the Blackwater Hills, that you'd rod the Box afore snow fell on the Sierra Madres. Guess you'd have collected."

"Guess again!" grinned Sam. "Mark was married, remember? His widow gets the spread and I guess she earned it. Best I can do is pay the bonus I promised, brace her and crave she hands out the jobs."

"Not for me!" rumbled Cherokee. "I never yet took orders from a female and I sure don't crave to start."

When they reached town, the two dropped into The Lone Star. The saloon's empty window frames gaped onto the

street, but inside a press of punchers washed trail dust out of their throats. A crack zig-zagged across the ornate back-bar mirror, work of a random bullet. In the center of the cracked glass, a notice, the type still damp from the press, had been posted:

CHECK YOUR GUNS!

Mike O'Dell, Sheriff.

Sam looked around, and, sure enough, there wasn't a gunbelt in sight. "I guess," growled Cherokee, loosening a buckle, "we got a new deal."

"Which was long overdue," commented Sam, and slid his gunbelt across the bar.

The murder warrant still on his mind, he downed a quick beer and hit for the courthouse. The sheriff, bluff and breezy as of old, hunched at his desk.

Sam sank upon a straightback chair beside it. "I guess," he said, "that warrant for Fatso's killing is still good. Before you serve it, chew on this." He told of his meeting with Mildred Benson in the Indian Campground, his capture of the bounty hunter and Big Nose's confession.

O'Dell put on a cigar. "That confession," he pointed out, "ain't worth a barrel of shucks and you know it. First, it was verbal and there warn't a witness. Second, I gamble the hombre made it under duress."

Sam raised his shoulders resignedly. "I figured you'd see it that way. All you got is my word."

"I don't need your word, Sam." O'Dell was grinning now, enjoying himself hugely. "I had the deadwood on the killer the same morning we found Fatso's body. Chuck Harden led you to Fatso's shack. Recollect the whiskery old goat? Wal, when you left, he stuck around curious as to what it was all about. Fatso slides in, also Deuce. Chuck hears a shot and sees Deuce beat it. I corralled Deuce yesterday, after the fracas. He'll hang!"

"But howcome . . ." began Sam.

O'Dell raised a hand. "Sam, The Three had me hogtied. They gave all the orders. I played along 'til I was bogged down to the neck. Then, when Turman loosed his wolves on the town I quit playing."

"You sure took a weight off my mind," admitted Sam, "and the Basin is panting for law and order."

"From now on," grunted the sheriff, "that's just what it gets. No chiseling politician puts another bridle on me."

Outside again, Sam remembered that he had to look up Mark's widow and put in a word for the boys who had sided him right through. The cowtown had already dropped back to its former state of lethargy. Shirt-sleeved citizens dawdled along the plankwalks, a storekeeper took his time tacking boards over glassless windows, a wrinkled oldtimer hunkered in the shade, whittling.

He found Mildred Benson in the lobby of the hotel. Like the sheriff, she seemed revitalized, sparkling.

"Well," she greeted, "thank goodness you've cleaned up the Basin. At last it will be a fit place to live in."

He dropped into a rocker beside her. "Guess you heard—about Mark."

"And I haven't dropped a tear," she retorted tightly. "I married the man in a fit of pique. He knew it! He also knew I grew to hate the very sight of him." Her tone changed, "When are you going to take over the Box?"

"Milly," he said firmly, "the Box is yours."

"It needs a man!"

"A goodlooking gal like you won't have to look far for a man."

"Not the man I want!" She looked him in the eyes. "Sam Benson, you rode out on me once, but you're not going to get away a second time. Will you marry me?"

They both rose and faced each other, half-smiling. "Sam," she said earnestly, "Don't think me bold, but I need you, I've always needed you."

"You think I don't need you!" he ejaculated, and gathered her in his arms.

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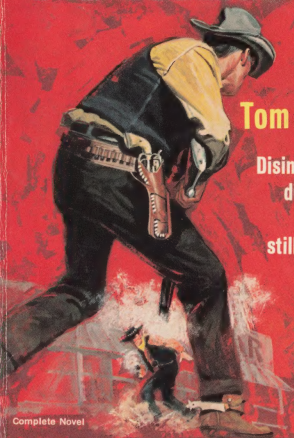
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